



*A PRIDE &
PREJUDICE
Variation*

COMPROMISE
& CONSEQUENCE

SUE BARR

COMPROMISE & CONSEQUENCE

By Sue Barr

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*Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think!
dear me! Mr. Darcy! Who would have
thought it! And is it really true? Oh! my
sweetest Lizzy! how rich and how great
you will be! What pin-money, what
jewels, what carriages you will have!*

Pride & Prejudice, Chapter XVII of Volume
III (Chapter 59)

Prologue

Longbourn, 1795

“You will raise her as one of your very own?”

The tall, robust gentleman held the hand of the child who had celebrated her fourth birthday a few days ago. She bounced on her toes, anxious to find her favorite person in the whole world and show her the new dolly Papa had given her prior to their coming to uncle’s house.

“She will want for nothing, but are you sure you wish to take this step?”

“Since Isabella’s passing, I cannot bear the empty rooms any longer. I see her in every corner. I hear her laughter and turn to find myself alone with nothing but memories.”

“But, what of your daughter? Should you not stay and guide her in life? She will have no memory of either parent if you resume your command in the Navy. We might not see you for years!”

“I promise to write letters and mail them from every port of call.” He looked down at his precious girl, who looked so much like her mother, his heart ached. “My solicitors have all the proper documentation if... well, if the inconceivable happens. She has been well provided for. Her grandfather has promised to stay in touch. If you need anything, do not hesitate to write to him.”

It was the closest he would ever come to admitting that his life was taking a dangerous turn where death was expected sooner rather than later, but he could not remain in the home he and his wife had purchased to raise their family.

“You know as well as I that correspondence from Spain is painfully slow,

even worse, given the current political state. Regardless, I will send regular updates on her upbringing. Of that, you have my word.”

The gentleman released his daughter’s hand in order to pick her up and hug her tight.

“Be a good girl for Uncle Thomas, Elizabeth. Papa has to go and sail a boat for the King.”

“Cannot the King sail his own boat, Papa?” the precocious four-year-old asked.

“The King trusts me to take care of his biggest boat. It is called a ship, and your Papa is the captain. Can you give me the best kiss you have ever given before I go?”

“Yes!” The child threw her arms around her Papa’s neck and favored him with a loud kiss on his bewhiskered cheek. Then, sensing things as only children can, she lowered her head onto his shoulder, the dolly hanging from her hand behind his back. “I will miss you ever so much, Papa. Almost as much as I miss Mama.”

“I will miss you as well, my darling girl.” Tears welled up in his eyes and he lowered her to the ground, giving her shoulder a soft squeeze. “Go see Jane. I am sure she will want to see your new doll and help you unpack that enormous trunk Naomi packed for you last night.”

“I will show her Lizzy Izzy.” She turned to skip toward the house. With one foot on the stone portico, she turned and said, “I love you, Papa.”

“And I love you, my Elizabeth Rose.”

That was the last Elizabeth Bennet saw of her father.

Chapter One

Longbourn, 1811

Four of the Bennet ladies from Longbourn walked a familiar laneway to the closest village of Meryton. In their midst, desperately attempting to keep up, was their out-of-shape cousin whom they had met for the first time the day before. Between trying to take hold of Miss Elizabeth Bennet's arm, which she conveniently kept out of his reach by various means, and doing a funny hop skip as he was not used to walking so far, he kept up a steady, if labored, one-sided conversation.

"My esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, would be well pleased to know how you keep fit by walking, Cousin Elizabeth." He paused to suck in a breath and

then hurried to catch up with her and the eldest Miss Bennet, Jane. “Do you always walk so quickly?”

Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Collins over her shoulder and then looked straight ahead so he wouldn’t notice the wide smile she could not hold back any longer.

“Oh no, Mr. Collins. We have slowed down our pace in deference to you. Normally, we walk much faster.”

“Faster?” he panted out, finally coming to a halt and bent low over his knees. “I must catch my breath.”

“Lizzy,” Jane said beneath her breath. “We are now bordering on cruel behavior.”

“I know,” she whispered back. “I shall stay with Mr. Collins. I see Charlotte down the lane, and we will accompany her. You go ahead and keep an eye on Lydia and Kitty. I do not trust what they are up to. They were too insistent on walking to Meryton today.”

Jane would have hesitated, but she saw

Charlotte Lucas coming toward them, so with a friendly wave, she hurried to catch up to her two youngest sisters.

“Charlotte, good timing on your part. Mr. Collins and I are walking into Meryton. Are you by chance also going into the village?”

By this time, Miss Lucas had come alongside. “I am. Mama has asked me to post a letter to our uncle.”

“Mr. Collins, may I present to you Miss Charlotte Lucas of Lucas Lodge?”

Her cousin had finally caught his breath and offered Charlotte an awkward bow.

“Miss Lucas, this is my cousin, Mr. Collins of Hunsford, Kent.”

“You should introduce me properly, cousin. I am the Reverend Mr. William Collins of Hunsford parsonage, of Rosings Park, Kent.”

“I stand corrected.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Collins. Are you here for an extended stay?”

Lizzy almost rolled her eyes, knowing

what was coming next. Mr. Collins did not disappoint.

“I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of the Hunsford parish. With her blessing, I intend to trespass upon the hospitality of my esteemed cousin Bennet till Saturday next, which I can do without any inconvenience, as Lady Catherine is far from objecting to my occasional absence on a Sunday, provided that some other clergyman is engaged to do the duty of the day.”

“Your patroness sounds like a fine woman,” Charlotte said, a twinkle in her eye. “It is good that she can spare you for so long.”

“Oh yes, she is the one who urged me to heal the breach in our families. My father did not like Mr. Bennet and refused even to speak his name, but now that he has passed, God

rest his soul, I felt the time had come for me to extend the olive branch and make amends.”

“Yes, Charlotte. Lady Catherine de Bourgh takes prodigious care of our cousin. There is nothing that escapes her notice.” Lizzy faced Mr. Collins. “You must tell her about the shelves in the closet.”

Mr. Collins, as expected, launched into a rapturous soliloquy about his patroness and her various recommendations to the parsonage and adjacent garden.

“I dare say she is a very knowledgeable woman,” Charlotte murmured when he finally finished speaking. “It is a pity that great ladies, in general, are not more like her. Does she live near you, sir?”

“The garden in which stands my humble abode is separated only by a lane from Rosings Park, her ladyship’s residence.” Mr. Collins practically beamed from the attention Charlotte paid him, which set Lizzy to think and plot a new direction for her verbose

cousin.

“Mr. Collins, when we reach Meryton, would you be so kind as to escort Miss Lucas to the post office. I fear the gentleman there might charge her too much for her letter, and having you there will keep him honest.”

“But I had intended to stay by your side, cousin Elizabeth.”

“Dear Mr. Collins, I have three members of my family with me. I am not without company. Plus, I intend to visit a lady’s shop, and you cannot enter the establishment.” He looked as though he would argue. “No, my mind is made up. You must be the dashing gentleman and provide protection for Miss Lucas.”

Charlotte raised an eyebrow at her blatant meddling but said nothing – just as Lizzy expected. Her best friend always said she was not looking for romance in marriage, seeking security and a good man instead. Lizzy did not look to her cousin that way, but Charlotte

would make a wonderful mistress of Hunsford parsonage and, in the future, Longbourn. She just had to make sure the officious donkey followed the carrot of Miss Lucas. Also, she had plans for when she reached her majority in May, and they did not include marriage.

By the time Elizabeth had finished the little bit of shopping required for her needs, Jane waited outside sporting a bright smile while Kitty and Lydia appeared quite disgruntled.

“Are we ready to walk home?” she asked them.

“We may as well, Denny and Wickham have gone back to the encampment. There is nothing to do now.”

“Denny and Wickham?” Lizzy queried.

“Kitty and Lydia introduced us to some officers from the ___shire Militia. A Captain Denny and a Mr. Wickham. I did not speak with them for very long as Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were on their way to Longbourn

and, when they saw us, stopped to inquire about my health.”

Jane had fallen ill while visiting Mr. Bingley’s sisters and stayed at Netherfield Park along with Elizabeth while she recovered. It seemed promising that Mr. Bingley attempted to call on Jane before two full days passed since they last were in his company.

“Mr. Bingley stopped, but Mr. Darcy took off as though his horse had a burr in its saddle,” Lydia laughed out. “Wickham was well pleased by that.”

“Why is that, Lydia?”

“I do not know all the details, but he did say in passing he and Mr. Darcy do not get along.”

“I am not sure there are many people who do,” Lizzy mused out loud, thinking of Mr. Darcy’s behavior and manner whenever he was out among the citizens of Meryton. “Well, I am glad Jane saw Mr. Bingley. At least one of us had a bright moment.”

“Where is Mr. Collins, Lizzy?” Jane’s head had come out of the clouds long enough for her to see her sister was entirely alone.

“I asked him to escort Charlotte to the postmaster. Should we check and see if they are still there?”

The Bennet ladies had not gone far when Charlotte and Mr. Collins exited the building and joined them for the walk home. The younger sisters spoke of nothing but officers, Jane daydreamed about Mr. Bingley, and Lizzy walked with Mr. Collins between her and Charlotte. If she lagged behind them every now and then, he did not seem to notice as Charlotte gave him much attention. For which both he and Lizzy were grateful.

After dinner, Mr. Collins solicited a request to sit next to Cousin Elizabeth in the parlor. About to excuse herself from the room, her aunt stopped her by saying, “Of course, you may sit with Lizzy, Mr. Collins. I am sure she will not object to your company.”

Although Mrs. Bennet could not technically decide whom she would marry, it was better not to tip the cart at this juncture. Therefore, Lizzy determined to use this time for a better, far-reaching purpose.

“How did you like my friend Miss Lucas, Mr. Collins?”

“She is a delightful lady. Well refined, soft-spoken. I know Lady Catherine would find her an acceptable friend.”

“I am glad you think Lady Catherine would like my friend, Charlotte. I do worry about what she would think of me.”

“Why is that?”

“Aunt Francis has always told me I am too opinionated and is forever lamenting the fact that my skirts are always six inches deep in mud. I do so like to walk no matter what the weather.”

“She says you are opinionated?”

“Most definitely. Ask any of my family. I think that is why I walk so much. Aunt Francis

and I tend to have small arguments over my perceived behavior. She thinks I am too headstrong for my own good and blames it on all the books Uncle Thomas allows me to read.”

“Your uncle allows you to read his books?”

“Oh, yes. He has not curtailed what I have read at all. Why the other week, I started reading Mrs. Wollstonecraft’s book. Miss Lucas warned me I should not. She would never dare, but I found I agreed with a lot of what Mrs. Wollstonecraft had to say.”

Mr. Collins partially leaned away from her; his mouth dropped open.

“Oh, this will never do. Lady Catherine would never approve.”

“Mr. Collins, I tell you these things because you are such an honorable gentleman and have made your intentions quite clear. In good conscience, I cannot allow you to engage your heart when you deserve a lady who will

match you in equal temperament and manners. Someone like my friend, Miss Lucas.”

“Thank you for your consideration, cousin Elizabeth. I *had* been looking upon you as my future companion, but Lady Catherine would never approve of a woman who read such radical books. I think I will speak with my cousin about this. It is quite distressing.”

“Please do, Mr. Collins. Uncle will tell you I returned the book and told him to hide it as I do not think my younger cousins are ready for such far-reaching ideas. The only thing I would ask is that you do not speak to Aunt Francis about this. It distresses her that we sometimes rub the wrong way, and I do not want to add to her burden. We may have our moments, but I love her dearly and would like to think she would be happy about you and I having an amicable relationship as cousins and friends.”

“Consider it done, cousin Elizabeth and I

look forward to a long friendship.”

“Will you be calling on Miss Lucas? As you know, we had a few moments of sharing confidences when you stopped to fix your shoe during our walk from Meryton, and she expressed an interest in your situation and made mention of how lucky you were to have such an attentive patroness. I do not think I would be remiss in directing your attention toward her.”

“I will think about this very carefully.”

“Yes, you must do that. Fortunately, we are all going to Mrs. Phillips for cards tomorrow evening, and I know Miss Lucas has been invited. This would be an excellent time for you to see how well she behaves in a social situation. You will not be disappointed. Sir William and Lady Lucas have raised a very well-mannered lady.”

“Oh, her father was knighted?”

“Yes, Mr. Collins.” Lizzy peeked through her lashes to see if her aunt still watched

them. Given that Mr. Collins was quite engaged in their conversation and she was smiling, the scene was set for what Mrs. Bennet would perceive as a courtship. Never had she acted so foolish in her entire life. *Pray that he does not ask Uncle about Mrs.*

Wollstonecraft. He had no such book in his library. “Sir William delights in telling new acquaintances of how he was presented at St. James’s court. No other person in Meryton can claim that honor.”

“I will indeed make myself known to the gentleman.”

Satisfied her prodding had planted the seed, she left it at that, confident that tomorrow the watering could be taken over by Charlotte.

The next evening was the card party at their Aunt Phillips. As no objection was made to the young people’s engagement with their aunt, and all Mr. Collins’s scruples of leaving Mr. and Mrs. Bennet for a single evening

during his visit were most steadily resisted, the coach conveyed him and his five cousins at a suitable hour to Meryton. Lydia and Kitty were well pleased to hear, upon entering the drawing-room, that Mr. Wickham had accepted their uncle's invitation and was also in attendance. Lizzy herself had not been introduced to the gentleman, but she could see why her sisters were in such a tither. He indeed was a handsome man, and from what she could tell, his manners were quite engaging.

During the evening, he sought her introduction, but Charlotte and her brother Jonathan had just entered the room, and Lizzy was anxious to affix Mr. Collins to her side.

“Pray, excuse me, Mr. Wickham. My friend has arrived, and I have some important news to impart. Please do not think me rude; I have enjoyed our conversation.”

“I would never think you rude, Miss Elizabeth, but I will request, in order to make

up for our shortened visit, when next we meet, if there is dancing, you would grant me a set.”

“I would be more than pleased to dance with you, Mr. Wickham.” She caught Charlotte’s eye and acknowledged her. “It has been a pleasure, sir.”

She then took her leave and crossed the room to where Charlotte stood.

“I am so glad you came tonight, Charlotte. I have much to relay and not much time.”

“You sound almost frantic. Whatever is the matter?”

“Nothing is the matter, but I have laid the cornerstone for the foundation of your marriage.”

“What?”

“Yes. Mr. Collins was making much noise about choosing me as a future wife, but I cannot abide the man – at least not as a husband. With subtle nudges, I have set him on a path that hopefully leads to you.”

“But, if you married him, your family

could remain at Longbourn when your uncle passes.”

“True, but as you well know, I am already well situated, and my cousins need not worry about where they will lay their heads when Uncle Thomas passes.” She had at one time confided in Charlotte a little of her family history. “Also, marriage is for life, and I cannot see myself making him happy. I know he would not make me happy. If I could have pushed him in Mary’s direction, I would have, but he is very much under the thumb of his patroness, and Mary would only sermonize, making it worse. Oh! Here he comes.” Lizzy and Charlotte both turned to greet him with pleasant smiles. “Mr. Collins. I was just complimenting Miss Lucas on the minced pies she brought over the other day.”

“You cook, Miss Lucas?”

“Cook? Miss Lucas not only makes mince pies, but Sir William has been heard to proclaim her dinner rolls are the best he has

ever tasted.” Charlotte reached between them and pinched her arm. Lizzy smiled and took a small step away. “I know she will deny all this because she is a modest Christian woman, but it is true.”

By this time, Mr. Collins had turned his undivided attention to Charlotte, and when Aunt Phillips called her guests to the card tables, he asked if she would partner him for a round of whist. With a slight skip in her step, Lizzy found Jane and filled her in on her successful evening.

“You are lucky Mama is not here.”

“Truer words were never spoken. It is a good thing they let us come alone. At this rate, he will probably make an offer to Charlotte by the end of this week.”

“You are that confident?”

“Jane, the poor man wants to marry so badly. He thinks it is his duty and dares not fail in the one task his patroness set for him before coming to Longbourn. And we are all

aware that Charlotte also longs for marriage. Mr. Collins is not a horrible man, but he is someone I could never marry. I wish to marry only for the deepest of love, as do you.”

Chapter Two

Lizzy sat with Jane on a small settee, watching and bemoaning the antics of Lydia and Kitty, while Mary stayed in a corner reading, looking up now and then to scowl in the direction of her younger sisters.

She loved all of them as though they were her true sisters since she'd come to live with them at four years of age. Her father, James Bennet, was the second son and third born to Henry and Rose Bennet. He had gone into the navy when he was but a lad, rising to the rank of Captain. While his ship underwent repairs in Spain in the fall of 1788, he met, fell in love, and married the beautiful Isabella de Cortez. Wanting to start a family, he retired and returned to England, where he purchased a lovely estate near his brother and, once

settled, was blessed with a beautiful daughter in May of 1791.

The first four years of Elizabeth's life were golden. Then Fate stepped in and took not only Isabella but her unborn baby in a terrible carriage accident. Her father, distraught with grief, turned to his elder brother and asked that he raise Elizabeth as his own. James Bennet then took over a new command in the Royal Navy, perishing at sea a short three years later.

Elizabeth and Jane had bonded almost immediately as there was only a year between them. Lizzy quickly became more of a sister than a cousin, and no one even blinked when she called her aunt and uncle Bennet, Mama and Papa. Even the citizens of Meryton looked on her as Thomas Bennet's second daughter. The fact that she was slight in stature, with mahogany curls and exotic dark eyes, while her *sisters* were tall, fair-haired, and blue-eyed, was rarely mentioned. Very few remembered

her origins or even James Bennet, for that matter. Lizzy's best friend Charlotte Lucas did because she had been ten when the tiny little girl came to live at Longbourn.

Lizzy's memories of her father were that of a large man with a ready smile and laugh who would lift her high above his head and make her squeal with delight. Her mother always teased the edges of her memory by way of a soft voice that had sung her to sleep or soothed her bumps and bruises. She still had in her possession a bottle of Mama's Jasmine perfume, and she guarded it as though it were a king's treasure. It was her greatest desire to wear that perfume, along with the string of pearls her father had gifted her mother on their wedding day when she walked down the aisle to meet the man she loved. She wanted, in some small way, for her parents to be with her when that happy occasion arrived.

Her only link with her mother's family had been quarterly letters from her grandfather,

who had passed on more than five years ago. Grandfather de Cortez's vast estate was inherited by a distant cousin in Barcelona, but all her grandmother's jewels were sent to her via courier and now sat safely in a vault, alongside her mother's, in a bank in London. The garnet necklace she wore had been her mother's. It was a tangible link to her past, and when stressed, she had a tendency to touch it for comfort.

The estate she'd inherited from her father was leased, and her aunt's brother in London managed all her assets and money, which consisted of her grandmother and mother's dowries as well as her father's fortune. No one but Uncle Gardiner, Mr. Bennet, and Elizabeth knew the true value of her worth.

Her reverie was disrupted when Mr. Wickham approached and asked if he could join her and Jane. At their assent, he lowered himself into the chair opposite and began to regale them with tales of his training, the

mishaps, as well as the successes he and his fellow officers enjoyed. His stories were so entertaining that Elizabeth's cheeks ached from smiling. On the surface, there was much to recommend this handsome young man, and she had to admit, she was not surprised his attentions were focused on Jane.

Her eldest cousin was an undisputed beauty. Tall and slim with hair the color of burnished wheat and azure blue eyes, most men came to a stuttering stop when they first saw her. She had an air of innocence that transcended description. Jane saw only the good in people. One had to work very hard to earn her anger, and when they did, they had best stay out of her way. She became an avenging angel when defending those she loved, as Jonathan Lucas found out to his detriment when they were all around the age of fourteen. Thankfully, the scar above his eye had healed quite nicely, and he held no ill will toward her.

Unfortunately for Mr. Wickham, unlike her cousin, Lizzy did not see everyone in a glow of golden light. While his manners were engaging, they seemed forced. While his smile was quick and ready, it did not meet his eyes. And most telling, while his lithe body seemed at ease in the chair, he kept a vigilant eye on the door as though calculating how long it would take to make a quick exit.

She had taken the measure of this man and found him wanting and would remain cautious while also keeping a watchful eye on her cousins. The two youngest could very easily fall prey to his well-practiced routine.

“How long has Mr. Darcy been in Hertfordshire?” he asked Jane.

His tone had changed, causing Elizabeth to believe this was the real reason he’d sought them out. Information on the taciturn gentleman from Derbyshire. She then remembered Lydia laughing over Mr. Darcy’s abrupt departure when they all saw him and

Mr. Bingley in Meryton the day prior and that Mr. Wickham had seemed well pleased by the fact.

“About a month, sir,” Jane replied

“He is a man of very large property in Derbyshire, I understand,” Elizabeth added.

“Indeed,” replied Wickham. “His estate there is a noble one. You could not have met with a person more capable of giving you certain information on that head than myself, for I have been connected with his family in a particular manner from my infancy.”

Both Jane and Elizabeth looked at each other, eyes widened in surprise.

“You may well be surprised, Miss Bennet,” said Wickham with a slight nod toward Jane, “at such an assertion after seeing the frigid manner of our greeting yesterday.”

“I admit, sir, I did not notice.”

Here Jane blushed, and Elizabeth knew very well her sister hadn’t noticed anything beyond Mr. Bingley. Mr. Darcy could have

jumped off his stallion, done the dance of the whirling dervish, and she still would not have seen anything beyond the amiable man from Netherfield. Mr. Wickham frowned. Lizzy had an inkling the conversation was not going as planned for the handsome officer.

“He is not at all liked in Hertfordshire. Everybody is disgusted with his pride.” Lizzy said to test the waters.

“That does not happen very often.” A sly smile slid across his face, and then his features smoothed once more. “The world is blinded by his fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high and imposing manners, and sees him only as he chooses to be seen.”

“I like to think that we, and our neighbors, judge a man by his character and not by wealth and property alone.”

“I wonder whether he is likely to be in this part of the country much longer.”

Although Elizabeth found this an odd thing to say, she responded politely with, “My

sister and I were in his company for a week, and at the time, I heard nothing of his going away.”

“That is too bad. We are not on friendly terms, and it always gives me pain to meet him. His father, the late Mr. Darcy, was one of the best men that ever breathed, and I can never be in company with *this* Mr. Darcy without being grieved to the soul by a thousand tender recollections.”

Further discovery came to a halt as another officer joined them, and Mr. Wickham began to speak on more general topics, Meryton, the neighborhood, the society, appearing highly pleased with all that he had encountered so far.

“Whatever made you choose the militia, Mr. Wickham?” Jane asked when it was just the three of them again.

“The prospect of constant society and good society was my chief inducement. I knew the ___shire militia to be a most respectable,

agreeable corps, and my friend Denny further tempted me with his account of their present quarters and the very great attention and excellent acquaintance Meryton had procured them.”

“We are glad that our little community is so well thought of.”

“My spirits will not bear solitude. I must have employment and society. Military life is not what I was intended for, but circumstances have now made it eligible. The church ought to have been my profession, and I should at this time have been in possession of a most valuable living had it pleased the gentleman we were speaking of earlier.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, the late Mr. Darcy bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift. He was my godfather and excessively attached to me, but when the living fell two years ago, it was given elsewhere by his son.”

“Good heavens!” cried Elizabeth. “Why

did you not seek legal redress?”

At first, she felt judicious anger at the arrogant man from Derbyshire who had withheld a valuable living from his father’s godson, but then, Mr. Wickham hedged his response.

“There was just such an informality in the terms of the bequest as to give me no hope from law. A man of honor could not have doubted the intention, but Mr. Darcy did.”

Nothing ironclad written down, just the hopeful words of a man who liked his godson. There was a myriad of reasons Mr. Darcy did not give the living to Mr. Wickham. For one, both men were of the same age, putting Mr. Wickham at around twenty-six or twenty-seven when the position as rector became available. What had he been doing up until that time? Only a fool would wait around for a living to become vacant. If the rector was in good health or not that old, he could remain in that position for up to fifty-plus years. None

of this made any sense.

She chose not to confront him with her reasoning and instead said, "That must have been very disappointing for you."

"It has been, but until I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose him."

"But what could have been his motive?" she mused after a pause, thinking he had just done that very thing, "What could have induced him to behave so cruelly toward his own father's godson?"

"A thorough, determined dislike of me which I cannot but attribute in some measure to jealousy. He has not the temperament to bear the sort of preference which was often given me."

"I will be the first to admit that I had not thought Mr. Darcy so bad as this. Granted, I always suspected him of despising his fellow creatures in general."

"Lizzy," Jane cautioned. "Mr. Darcy has always acted like a gentleman. You should not

throw it about that he does not behave with great circumspection. I believe he is a quiet man. Maybe even shy.”

“I will soften my words, just for you dearest Jane, but,” she continued, “I do remember his boasting one day at Netherfield, of the implacability of his resentments, of his having an unforgiving temper.”

“I cannot be neutral on this subject,” replied Wickham, “We were born in the same parish and the greatest part of our youth was passed together. My father was highly esteemed by the elder Mr. Darcy, a most intimate, confidential friend as well as head steward of his estate. Immediately before my father’s death, Mr. Darcy gave him a voluntary promise of providing for me, I am convinced that he felt it to be as much a debt of gratitude to him as of affection to myself.”

“How strange that he would not provide at least a pecuniary value to what his father promised yours.”

Lizzy posed the question out loud, but Mr. Wickham's answer was never supplied as the whist party showed signs of breaking up and Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas joined them. With a rueful smile, Charlotte relayed she and Mr. Collins had not won very many hands.

"I know very well, Miss Lucas that when people sit down to a card table, they must take their chance of these things. Happily, thanks to the benevolence of my patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, I am well able to lose one or two shillings without much worry whether I can afford another side of beef in my larder."

Elizabeth, glancing around to check on Lydia and Kitty, chanced to see that Mr. Wickham's attention had been caught.

"Is your family intimately acquainted with the family of de Bourgh?" he asked Jane.

"Lady Catherine de Bourgh," Jane replied, "has very lately given our cousin a living. I hardly know how Mr. Collins was first

introduced to her notice, but he certainly has not known her long.”

“You know that Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Lady Anne Darcy were sisters, and consequently, she is aunt to the present Mr. Darcy.”

“We did not know, sir,” Elizabeth said. “We knew nothing at all of Lady Catherine’s connections. In fact, we never heard of her existence till the day before yesterday.”

Mr. Wickham lowered his voice and said, “Her daughter, Miss de Bourgh, will have a very large fortune, and it is believed that she and her cousin Darcy will unite the two estates.”

Lizzy shot a quick look at Jane and could not stop the grin. Poor Miss Bingley, the haughty lady they had met only six weeks prior. She doted on Mr. Darcy and practically draped herself on his arm at every conceivable opportunity. All her vanities and useless affection for Mr. Darcy’s sister and her praise

of the man and his vast estate were all for naught. He was already self-destined to another.

Their small group naturally disintegrated as they found others to chat with and more games to partake in. A few times, she or Jane had to step in and temper Lydia's enthusiasm, and when they finally made their way home, she talked incessantly of lottery tickets, of the fish she had lost and the fish she had won. Elizabeth did not care. Her mind was filled with the success of Mr. Collins and Charlotte, as well as the information Mr. Wickham had dumped on them without invitation.

Portions of what he said rang true, but there were too many inconsistencies for her to believe all of his tales. Yes, Mr. Darcy was proud. Yes, Mr. Darcy could be quite disagreeable, but was he dishonest? Would he not do his very best to honor his father's wishes? She shook her head mentally. Why did she care? The gentleman from Derbyshire

had no time for her. She was barely tolerable in his eyes, and the first night she'd stayed at Netherfield to nurse Jane, she overheard comments as she passed the room where they all were gathered.

Mr. Bingley had said, "*If they had uncles enough to fill all Cheapside, it would not make them one jot less agreeable.*" Which made her think the sisters had, once again, brought up Aunt Bennet's relatives who lived in London. She would not have cared if she had not also heard Mr. Darcy's reply. "*But it must very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world.*" As she had suspected, Mr. Darcy did not look upon the Bennet women as those he would ever prevail upon to marry. Mayhap it was a good thing he was already betrothed to his cousin.

Poor Miss Bingley.

The next day, she and Jane spoke about the conversation they'd had with Mr. Wickham.

“What think you, Jane? I cannot make out why Mr. Wickham chose to air his grievances about Mr. Darcy with us. To what benefit?”

“I refuse to believe Mr. Darcy would be so callous. He is a great friend to Mr. Bingley, whom we all know is not of the first circles. If Mr. Darcy were as proud and conceited as Mr. Wickham would like us to believe, why would he stay as a guest for months on end?”

“Thank you for saying that. I am of the same mind. I wonder if we should caution Papa about Mr. Wickham. He is far too smooth-talking for my liking, and Lydia seems to favor him the most of all the officers. In fact, her behavior at times has been almost scandalous.”

The two young ladies were summoned from the shrubbery where this conversation passed, by the arrival of Mr. Bingley and his sisters, come to give their personal invitation for the anticipated ball at Netherfield, which was fixed for the following Tuesday. Miss

Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were delighted to see *dear Jane* again, calling it an age since they had last met, and repeatedly asked what she had been doing with herself since their separation.

Not missing you, came the caustic thought to Lizzy, and she hid a smile behind her teacup. Jane saw the smirk and, with a barely perceptible shake of her head, chastised her impertinent cousin.

To the rest of the family, the sisters paid little attention, avoiding Mrs. Bennet as much as possible, saying not much to Elizabeth and nothing at all to the others. They were soon gone again, rising from their seats with a rapidity that took their brother by surprise but not Elizabeth.

“Oh, Jane,” Mrs. Bennet enthused as soon as their carriage departed. “I am in raptures over the fact Mr. Bingley has singled you out for his attention. By soliciting your attendance to his ball in person rather than sending a

ceremonious card, it is an honor we shall not take lightly.”

At Jane’s resultant dreamy look, Lizzy well knew she envisioned a happy evening in the society of Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth, herself, thought with pleasure the number of dance partners she could elicit for the evening. The happiness anticipated by Catherine and Lydia depended less on the event itself but of a particular person. Elizabeth knew, beyond doubt given their excited exclamations, that they both meant to dance half the evening with Mr. Wickham. Fortunately, he would by no means be the only partner who could satisfy them. Even Mary became a little caught up in the excitement and assured her family that she had no disinclination for it.

They all resumed drinking their tea, and Mr. Collins took a seat by Elizabeth.

“Would you take offense if I asked Miss Lucas for the first set at Mr. Bingley’s ball? A preference which I trust my cousin Jane or

you, cousin Elizabeth, will attribute to the right cause and not to any disrespect to the both of you.”

A wave of relief washed over Elizabeth. Her careful planning and not-so-subtle nudges had apparently worked. She need not worry about rebuffing an offer of marriage from Mr. Collins.

“We are not offended, Mr. Collins. In fact, your solicitous regard for our feelings shows us what a warm and humble man you are. Miss Lucas will be well pleased by your attention and gives us, your cousins, great joy.” Elizabeth looked at Jane and winked. “In fact, why do we not all attend Lucas Lodge and have a visit. At that time, you may ask Miss Lucas for her hand... for the first dance, that is.”

“You would come with me to Lucas Lodge?”

“Of course. As ladies, we need to plan our dresses and various *accoutrements*, and will not

be affronted if you happen to take our friend aside for a few minutes to make your request.”

At his happy nod, Elizabeth spoke a little louder and addressed Aunt Bennet.

“Mama, Jane, and I, along with Mr. Collins, are going for a walk. We might stop by Lucas Lodge and visit with Charlotte while there.”

Mrs. Bennet, pleased as punch that Lizzy had thought to include Mr. Collins in her venture, readily agreed, and so it was, a half-hour later, the party of three made their way to Lucas Lodge. Later that week, after five consecutive days of rain, Elizabeth was glad they’d gone when they did. If they had waited until the next day, her plans of Mr. Collins securing Charlotte for the first dance would have been foiled, and her aunt might have directed his request toward her. As it was, when Mrs. Bennet queried Lizzy about Mr. Collins asking for the first set, she had answered with complete truth.

“Mr. Collins did secure the first set,
Mama.”

She did not tell her aunt he had secured the set with Miss Lucas; she would find out soon enough on her own, and then it would be too late.

Chapter Three

Upon entry into Netherfield Park the night of the ball, Elizabeth was awed by the magnificent splendor and took it all in with one sweeping glance. From the light of hundreds of beeswax candles sparkling off the chandeliers to the elegant gowns of Meryton's finest, the scene was a myriad of swirling colors and smells, and for the first time, she realized why the party at Netherfield had thought the local assembly was so below their notice.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sheer opulence. She may not like the lady, but Miss Bingley certainly knew how to throw a ball. She could not fault her in one detail. Even when she greeted the Bennet family, she had behaved as a hostess should. Granted, her

greeting was barely civil, but at least this time she did not sneer in their general direction, although she had given her brother a hard nudge in the ribs with her elbow when he lingered over greeting Jane.

Elizabeth, for one brief moment, had an insight into the life her mother might have led before marrying James Bennet. As the only daughter to a wealthy titled landowner in Spain, she would have known what it was like to attend these types of balls and fetes.

Uncle took himself off to the card room while her aunt set herself up near the terrace doors where other matrons liked to linger in order to see who went outside with whom. Kitty and Lydia took off for one of the drawing rooms in search of Mr. Wickham and Captain Denny, while Mary nestled in an out-of-the-way nook where she could look over the sheets of music, she'd brought in hopes of being asked to perform.

Of Mr. Darcy, she saw neither hide nor

hair of him. Thank goodness. The last thing she needed was that annoyingly handsome man's eyes following her about the room, casting judgment and cataloging all her faults.

Lizzy and Jane proceeded to the main ballroom, where they found Charlotte and Mr. Collins, speaking quietly along the edges of what would become the dancing area. Over the next hour, the room filled and the musicians began warming up their instruments. Jane and Bingley, Charlotte, and Mr. Collins joined a host of other guests when the first set was signaled to begin.

Lizzy, partially screened by a potted palm, had to stifle a giggle when her aunt noticed who had partnered with Mr. Collins for the first dance. Eyes narrowed, she searched the remaining dancers and then began to look about the room. Fortunately, she did not see her niece anywhere, but Lizzy knew she would not escape complete retribution. At least, not until tomorrow.

She was so satisfied over having evaded her aunt's machinations with Mr. Collins she did not see the approach of Mr. Darcy. She gave a start when he stepped in front of her and offered a polite bow. Not for the first time in their acquaintance, she was caught up in his gaze.

“May I have the next set, Miss Elizabeth?”

His lips curved into a captivating smile and Lizzy had the sense he could be quite charming when it suited him. If he had shown this side of his character upon his arrival in Meryton, she might not have held onto the grudge she still felt so keenly after his initial insult and resultant proud behavior, exhibited on a daily basis while she was a Netherfield Park nursing Jane back to health.

“I am afraid my next two sets are spoken for, sir. You may have the fourth,” she replied with more than a touch of petulance. If she denied his unexpected third entreaty to dance, she would be forced to sit out the remainder

of the ball.

Odious man.

“I shall return for our dance, Miss Elizabeth.”

With that, he pivoted and strode through the crowd. She lost sight of his athletic build and broad shoulders when he reached the opposite side of the room and exited through a side door.

“Did Mr. Darcy just claim a dance?” Jane asked, her eyes round as saucers. She had come alongside near the end of her conversation with the reserved gentleman.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

“Oh, my,” Jane continued in a low voice. “What will Mama say?”

“Mama? I am more worried about Miss Bingley.”

The two cousins stared at each other before breaking into laughter. Each did their very best to stifle the giggles behind their fans, achieving success as long as they did not look

at each other. It was while she and Jane watched guests milling about, awaiting their partners for the start of the second set, that she realized Mr. Darcy had not opened the ball with his host's sister. That dubious honor, as Elizabeth regarded the task, had fallen to her brother.

Poor Miss Bingley, indeed.

She enjoyed the second dance with an officer, Mr. Chamberlain, and the third with Jonathan Lucas, surprised to see Mr. Darcy dancing with his host. Immediately upon the conclusion of that set, he accompanied Miss Bingley back to her brother's side and then approached to claim Elizabeth's hand. She took her place in the line, slightly amused by the looks of amazement from her neighbors at her austere partner. They stood for some time without speaking a word and she began to imagine their silence was to last through the whole two sets. At first, she thought to leave him to his silence, but then the imp of

mischievous which sat upon her shoulder at times such as this goaded her into obliging the taciturn man to speak.

“Miss Bingley has outdone herself in the decorations for this ball.”

“Yes, she has,” was his only reply before falling silent once again.

After a pause of some minutes, she addressed him a second time with:

“It is your turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. I talked about the dance, and you ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room or the number of couples.”

He smiled, showing the slightest hint of a dimple in one cheek, and her breath caught in her throat. Rare was the day Mr. Darcy curved his lips in an upward trajectory, and she wished he did that more. It might lessen the bite of his haughty behavior. Lost in her musings, she nearly missed his assuring her that whatever she wished him to say should be said.

“Very well. That reply will do for the present. Perhaps by and by, I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones. *Now* we may be silent.”

“Do you talk as a rule while dancing?”

She had the impression he was not perturbed by the fact, only slightly amused.

“Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together.”

“Your sisters. Do they often walk to Meryton?”

“As much as they can. At times it is their sole source of entertainment.”

“I only brought this up as I noticed them, unchaperoned, in the company of some officers.”

“Are you referring to last week when you and Mr. Bingley came upon them?”

“I am acquainted with one of the gentlemen and would not like to see your sisters deceived as to his true motives.”

“I assume you are speaking of Mr. Wickham.”

“I am.”

“He is an amiable gentleman and easy to talk to.”

She marveled at the shade of hauteur that spread over his face. Mr. Wickham had spoken at least one form of truth. Mr. Darcy did not like the man at all.

“Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his *making* friends – whether he may be equally capable of *retaining* them is less certain.”

“I have been made aware he has lost your friendship,” replied Elizabeth.

“I do not wish to argue with you, Miss Elizabeth. There are many aspects to Mr. Wickham of which you are not fully aware.”

“That is true, and his story, to some, would be very compelling. I remember hearing you once say that you hardly ever forgave, that your resentment once created

was unappeasable. You are very cautious, I suppose, as to its *being created*.”

“I am,” he said with a firm voice.

“And your anger with Mr. Wickham is well-formed.”

“May I ask the reason for this turn in conversation?”

“I am curious in the formation of your character,” she demurred, endeavoring to move them from the dark road their conversation had turned onto. “I hear such different accounts of you... they puzzle me exceedingly.”

“That, I can readily believe,” he answered gravely, “I wish, Miss Elizabeth, that you not sketch my character at the present moment, as I fear you are not in possession of all the facts and your portrait of me would not be a faithful one.”

“I may never have another opportunity, Mr. Darcy. Our conversations are limited to social gatherings where we are continually

surrounded. A country dance at a ball may be the only time I can speak with you uninterrupted with not much danger of being overheard.”

“If that is the case, all I ask is that you take the words of others with caution.”

“Yes, the words of others,” she sighed out, “I would hate to think of you as barely tolerable and not worthy of my time.”

She said no more, and they went down the dance and parted in silence, his handsome face a cold mask of fury or shame, she knew not. They had not long separated when Miss Bingley came alongside and said in a purely condescending manner, “So, Miss Eliza, I hear you are quite delighted with George Wickham.”

“I have not said anything like that to anyone.”

“No matter, your sister has been talking to me about him. Let me, as Mr. Darcy’s *particular* friend, caution you to not take

anything that man says as truth. I am well aware of his assertions of Mr. Darcy using him ill. It is perfectly false, for Mr. Darcy has always been remarkably kind to him. I do not know the particulars, but I know very well that Mr. Darcy is not in the least to blame. The poor dear cannot bear to hear the name of George Wickham mentioned.”

“Miss Bingley, I assure you. I am not the one who has brought his name into conversations this evening. That courtesy has fallen to both you and Mr. Darcy.”

“I beg your pardon,” replied Miss Bingley, turning away with an air of self-importance. “Excuse my interference. It was kindly meant.”

Pffftt... And frogs do not sit on lily pads,
Lizzy thought and suppressed a snort of derision.

She started to seek out Jane when she thought she spied Lydia slipping outside while her aunt was distracted. Worried her youngest cousin would do something silly, she hastened

after them, only to see the girl was Miss Long. Breathing out a sigh of relief, Elizabeth pivoted to enter the house and stopped at the sight of Mr. Darcy standing not five feet from her.

“Are you well, Miss Elizabeth. You came out here without a coat and could catch a chill if not careful.” He paused, his attention caught by something over her shoulder and his features tightened with anger. “Wickham!”

She partially turned but did not see Mr. Wickham or anyone else behind her. Shivers ran up and down her arms. “I find I am chilled. Pray, excuse me, Mr. Darcy.”

She took a step and her dancing slipper caught on an uneven stone, causing her to lurch forward. She threw out her hands to stop her fall, gasping when Mr. Darcy wrapped his arms around her waist before she hit the ground. Both of them froze at the sound of tearing. She looked down and saw the lace edging of her bodice hooked on one of the

buttons of his waistcoat.

“Do not stand up, Mr. Darcy. The lace on my gown has caught on your button, and I must take care, so it does not tear further.”

“Madam, we are in an awkward position.”

“I am aware of that fact, but if you stand, you could tear the gown further.”

She frantically tried to loosen the lace, but it would not let go. Frustrated, she held his button firm and ripped through the lace edging. They could both now stand, and once they did, her gown gaped slightly.

“Do not think this ruse you and Wickham tried to cook up will work.”

What? Mr. Wickham?

“I have not the slightest idea of what you are talking about, but if you would please walk in front of me, I can stay hidden. I will remove at once to the lady’s retiring room. All I ask is that you find Jane and have her attend me there.”

They had almost made it to the door when

Caroline Bingley once again made an appearance, with Aunt Francis hot on her heels. Lizzy was sure, in hindsight, Miss Bingley wished she had not said a word, but her hatred for the country chit was so great, so defined, all she saw was a chance to embarrass her in front of friends and family.

“Miss Eliza Bennet. How *did* you get that tear in the bodice of your gown?”

Mr. Darcy cursed.

Elizabeth sighed.

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For Darcy and the Bennet family, the ball came to an abrupt halt. Mr. Bennet called for the carriage and then told Darcy he expected to see him first thing in the morning at Longbourn. With his jaw flexing in anger, he nodded in the affirmative.

Miss Bingley, now fully cognizant of what she'd started, tried to mitigate her words by saying, 'It is only a small tear. Why you can

barely see the top of her chemisette.' Of course, no one listened, Darcy thought angrily. This was the best morsel of gossip this backwater town had had to chew on in years. By the time everyone exited Netherfield Park later that night, rumors had circulated and grown until it was widely reported that he had accosted Miss Elizabeth in the garden and her mother had found the two of them barely clothed in the gazebo. They all expected the arrival of a Mister or Miss Darcy by August of next year.

As far as Darcy was concerned, that was *not* going to happen. Ever.

Prior to Miss Elizabeth turning around to face him, he had spied a red-coated officer slinking behind the bushes in the garden. Because she had openly admitted to meeting George Wickham, his thoughts had naturally flown in the direction of her being part of yet another elaborate scheme to extort money from him.

Given that Wickham's compromise of Darcy's sister Georgiana failed, he obviously had gotten craftier and enlisted the aid of a gullible woman who would, after marrying the heir to Pemberley, gladly dip into her pin money and send it to him. Darcy might, as a gentleman of honor, be obliged to marry her but it would be a cold day in Hades before any more of his money found its way into the pocket of that reprobate. Once married, every purchase made by Mrs. Darcy would be carefully scrutinized, and her pin money would be negligible.

He pushed through all the people gawking and murmuring and started for his room.

"Darcy!" Bingley called out and caught up to him at the foot of the stairs. Close behind him was Miss Bennet, her eyes wide with surprise or anguish, he could not tell. "What has happened? Rumors are swirling that you and Miss Elizabeth were compromised."

"It was an elaborate trap."

“What? How?”

“Wickham,” was all he would say in a low voice and glared at Miss Bennet over Bingley’s shoulder. “I dare not say more. I will not return to the ball. Give your sister my regrets.”

With that, he mounted the stairs to the second floor and his bedchamber, barking orders to his valet to start packing. They would leave for London as soon as he spoke with Bennet. He penned a note to his cousin Richard and asked his valet to have an express rider take it to London as soon as possible on the morrow. He then went to bed and tried to sleep.

How could he have gotten caught? After more than six years of side-stepping desperate mamas and their tenacious daughters, he had been snagged in the wilds of Hertfordshire by a woman who was quite possibly Wickham’s latest paramour. He had a tendency to know his accomplices intimately. Good old George always mixed business with pleasure. It was

how he'd coerced Georgiana's last companion.

Mrs. Younge had been Wickham's lover for more than a year before they cooked up a scheme for her to take the job as his sister's companion. From there, it had been easy to suggest they go to Ramsgate for holidays and for Wickham to appear and deceive his innocent sister into thinking he had always loved her and now that she was so grown up, he couldn't wait to marry her.

Darcy would always remain thankful Georgiana had written, hinting she had some news and he would be so happy for her. Sensing something was not right, he and Richard had left for Ramsgate that very morning and arrived two days before the planned elopement. Richard wanted to run Wickham through with a sword, and now he wished fervently he'd let him.

Unable to sleep, he slid out of bed and brought out some paper. If he couldn't get any rest, he would begin the preliminaries of the

marriage settlement. Bennet would know fairly soon that his daughter was not going to profit from this marriage.

The sun was low on the horizon when he finished transcribing the last article on Bennet's copy. He sanded the document and then leaned back in the chair and read it over. A grim smile twisted his normally handsome face. The settlement was so vile, Miss Elizabeth might just beg off marrying him and suffer the shame of being thought immoral. That outcome would suit him as well. His valet came into the room, and soon he was dressed and downstairs to break his fast. Surprisingly, Charles joined him.

"You are up early, Bingley. I thought for sure you would stay in bed until past noon."

"I knew you would be up early and wanted to apologize for what happened last night."

"This is not your fault. Lay the blame where it belongs. Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

“Do you truly think she conspired with Wickham?”

“I have reason to believe that, yes.”

“I would never have dreamed her capable of such deceit. She and her sister always struck me as genteel, refined ladies.”

“As you well know, appearances are deceiving.” Darcy finished his coffee and stood. “I am off to London. Shall I see you there in a few days, or are you remaining in Hertfordshire?”

“Caroline is adamant about leaving, and I... I shall bend to her wishes. There was a time when I might have been persuaded to stay....”

“No need to elaborate, I understand exactly what you mean. I had no intentions of returning either.”

“You are not... I mean... you are going to London this very day?”

“As soon as the carriage is ready, I am off.”

He knew very well Bingley thought he was leaving Elizabeth Bennet high and dry with her reputation in tatters, flapping wildly on the winds of gossip, and in his anger, he did not care to elaborate further. When he had a better handle on his emotions, he would explain everything – away from the keen ear of his sister. His good friend knew about Wickham and Ramsgate and would understand why he was so furious at the moment.

“As we both will be in town, come for dinner Saturday. Then we can discuss what all has happened.”

He said his farewells, entered the carriage, and took off in the direction of Meryton, passing through on his way to Longbourn. All too soon, the manor came into view, and he was exiting the carriage to glare at the house where *she* lived. Before he'd even pulled the bell, the door was opened, and he was led to Mr. Bennet's library. An hour later, he faced

the man over his desk, who shook with anger.

“These terms are a disgrace. I cannot sign it.”

“Then your daughter does not marry. It matters not to me. Personally, I do not want the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted by a person of her character. Good day, Mr. Bennet.”

“Wait! Lizzy should not have to live her life in shame. She did nothing wrong.”

“Your daughter waited until I came onto the terrace and then *fell* into my arms just as your wife came outside. All so very convenient, think you not? Wickham will not get one penny from me.”

“Mr. Wickham?”

“Ask your daughter. I am sure she has much to add in that direction.” He enunciated each word tightly. “I will return next Tuesday with the final settlement, and you will arrange a common license.”

“Very well,” Bennet finally conceded.

“However, I want a clause added which states all outside assets and income that come into her name, as well as current assets, personal belongings and money Elizabeth is in possession of now, remain her exclusive property both during the marriage and after it, and can never be given to you, or any member of your family. It will be hers to disburse as she sees fit. I have prepared a rough outline for your solicitor.”

Bennet handed him a single sheet of paper.

Darcy almost scoffed out loud at the country squire, acting as though they had great wealth. Everyone knew the estate was entailed, and most likely, the only asset Miss Elizabeth had was the pretty garnet cross she wore daily. Other than whatever funds she would receive upon the deaths of either Mr. or Mrs. Bennet would make no difference. However, if it made the man stop wasting his time, he would agree.

“Very well, I will have my solicitor include this clause, at no expense to you,” he said with a condescending sneer. “Ensure your daughter is ready to leave immediately following the ceremony.” Darcy settled his hat on his head, uncaring that he was still inside the house. He wrenched open the door to Bennet’s study and stormed out of the house.

Chapter Four

Thomas Bennet fell back into his chair, shocked by the anger the man felt for his niece. He sat in silence, his mind whirling before calling for Elizabeth to attend him in his library. Mrs. Hill found her in the side garden and told her the master wished to speak with her. Jane gave her hand a squeeze and then she made her way to her uncle's library, feeling as though she were walking to a certain death sentence.

“Enter,” her uncle said at her knock.

“Mr. Darcy has left, I presume,” she said with a quick look about the room.

“He has and will return next week. Shut the door, child, there is much to discuss.”

She did as he requested and then sat, hands clasped in her lap, heart pounding in

her chest.

“I will not sugar coat this, Lizzy. You are to wed Mr. Darcy this upcoming Tuesday.” Involuntarily her eyes closed. It was as she suspected.

“My plans to travel to Spain are postponed indefinitely, it seems,” she said on a heavy sigh.

Papa reached over and squeezed her hand. He alone knew how long she’d been planning on visiting her mother’s family once she reached her age of majority.

“He has asked me to arrange the common license so that you may wed at Longbourn Chapel and will bring with him the final marriage settlements for signing.”

“That is unexpected. I had thought he would prefer a Special License in order to keep our secret within the walls of Longbourn.”

“I was under the impression he did not want to air his dirty laundry in front of the archbishop. A common license will do just as

well. Also, he insisted that you wear the gown you had on at the ball last night.”

“It is torn!” she gasped out.

“He is aware and cares not. Have Kitty start mending it for you, she is very talented with a needle.” He pushed his chair away from his desk and looked out the window, a sure sign he did not want to tell her the rest but must.

“You are allowed to bring one trunk. He is taking you straight to Pemberley and has forbidden you from staying in contact your family.”

“Am I not even allowed to write or receive letters?”

“He said you may not write to your family,” Papa said with a heavy sigh.

“I see, but nothing about receiving letters?” Papa shook his head. “That is good. It could have been worse.”

“It does get worse.”

“I do not see how. As it is, I must leave

almost everything behind as I cannot fit all my belongings in one trunk and am losing my family in less than a week. How could this possibly get worse?”

“He is settling on you fifty pounds.”

“Per month, or quarter?”

“No, child. Per annum.”

Stunned, she fell back into her chair, finally understanding how deep his anger was.

“He is a bitter man, Lizzy. He kept saying that you and Wickham would not succeed in your plans.”

“He also mentioned Mr. Wickham. I have no idea what he is talking about. He once said his good opinion, once lost was lost forever.” She worried her lower lip between her teeth. “I will not marry him. I would rather be thought immoral than put up with his anger and hatred.”

“Elizabeth.” She started at her uncle calling her by her full name. “Think of your cousins. You were openly compromised in

front of nearly every citizen of Meryton. They will bear the brunt of your shame. Your aunt and I will also be shunned. This is more than just you. I am sorry, my dear, you must marry him and make the best of it. With luck, he will leave you in Derbyshire, then head for London, and you will never have to speak with him for months on end. Fortunately, all of your assets and money remain in your control.”

“That is one good thing, I suppose. We have worked too hard to lose everything now to a man who cares nothing for our family.”

She felt the gaze of her adopted father and knew his heart had to be breaking as well. Even though she was not his true daughter, she was his avowed favorite, and to know she would be at the mercy of a man who actively hated her would tear him up inside.

“It will be difficult to write letters of business, let alone private letters with the strictures he has placed on you. You cannot

contact family.”

“When I last heard from Aunt Madeline, she wrote that she knew the area of Mr. Darcy’s home intimately. She grew up not five miles from his estate, and her brother is the rector in..., I cannot recall at this exact moment what she called the village – I shall re-read her letter – but there might be a way for us to communicate without his knowledge.”

“How so?”

“I am sure Mr. Darcy will not ban me from Sunday Service, and if Aunt’s relatives are willing, when I am in the village, I can pass correspondence through them. Technically, they are not my family, so I will not be in violation of his edicts.”

“That might work, but if they describe you...”

“As I said, Aunt Madeline’s brother is the rector in that little village. I can safely have a conversation with him as Mrs. Darcy, and no

one will think it odd.”

“True enough.” Papa began to smile, catching where her thoughts were traveling. “This could work.”

“Say nothing to Mama or the girls. All it takes is one loose tongue, and my tentative plan will fail before I can enact it.”

“I may not be able to stop this marriage, but I will not leave you immediately destitute. I have a little over five hundred pounds in my strongbox and will send that with you.”

“Papa, you need that money for Longbourn!”

“You know this is only what I keep on site. I am not worried about the money. If it makes you feel any better, I will have Gardiner reimburse me from your funds.” Papa leaned forward on his desk. “If it proves untenable to stay in Derbyshire, write me, regardless of what the high and mighty Mr. Darcy says. I will find a way to remove you to safety.”

“Never did I think I would have to worry

about my safety with Mr. Darcy. Arrogant and prideful he most assuredly is, but I do not believe he would physically threaten a woman.”

“Unprincipled anger makes a man do many things he thought impossible. Keep your head down and learn to stay out of his sight and mind.” Papa picked up a document and handed it to her. “Read this well. It is a rough copy of the legal settlement he is having his solicitor prepare for my signing when he returns. You will see that I am settling on you fifty pounds per annum.”

She couldn’t help but smile at the sum. “Did you do this for his benefit or for mine?”

“I had to show I was willing to give you something, otherwise he may be induced to look closer at the added clause when he comes next week. This way, in his arrogance, he will scrawl his signature, confident in the fact you rely solely on him.”

She took the sheets of paper and began to

peruse them. A few times, she lifted her gaze and looked at her uncle. Finally, she growled out, “Odious man! Upon his death, if I am still alive, I am to leave Pemberley and never return. He has graciously included one thousand pounds to be given to me immediately and an annual allowance of two hundred pounds a year until my death or remarriage. How magnanimous of him! His generosity quadruples upon his demise. His cousin, some colonel, will be the guardian of any children, along with his uncle the earl. As if we will have any children!” she exclaimed.

“Lizzy, you should know – this is not a marriage of convenience. He expects to sire an heir and, as such, will treat you as his wife in every respect.”

She felt a deep flush invade her cheeks, mortified at the thought.

“I will not hold my breath waiting for him to come to my bed. Argh! It is so frustrating to be a woman with no control over their own

life. How I wish I had been born a son!”

Lizzy left Papa’s library, hoping to walk off some anger, when Mr. Collins stopped her in the hall.

“I have just learned what happened last night and saw Mr. Darcy leaving this house in such a rage. I must know. Has he made an offer of marriage?”

“If you could call such a travesty an offer,” Lizzy said, not able to hide her bitterness.

“Indeed, it is a travesty. Why Mr. Darcy is betrothed to Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s most precious daughter, Miss Anne de Bourgh. She will be seriously displeased over what has occurred. I must speak with your uncle and put a halt to this. What will she think?”

“Mr. Collins, while I appreciate the fact you are concerned for Lady Catherine’s well-being and that of her daughter’s, I do not believe this *can* be stopped. At this very moment, Mr. Darcy is on his way to London to have the marriage settlement drawn up.”

Mr. Collins openly gaped, his eyes wide with fright. Then a calm stole over his face, and he nodded, as though having agreed with a conclusion he'd figured out in his head.

“Very well, cousin Elizabeth. I shall know what to do.”

With that, he spun on his heel and went upstairs to his room. As for herself, she also went to her room to compose a letter to her Aunt Gardiner to lay the groundwork for a secret correspondence before taking a walk to calm her mind.



Later that same afternoon, Darcy stretched out his long legs and lifted the cut glass filled with fine brandy to his lips. He'd stopped at his club after dropping off the rough draft of the marriage settlement to his solicitors. He would pick it up on Monday, and then Tuesday... Tuesday he would become a married man. Exactly one week from the

catalyst that created the compromise.

He remembered the raised eyebrow and pursed lips of his solicitor when he read over the rough draft and how his brow had then furrowed over the added clause Bennet had insisted upon. At the time, he told his solicitor to ensure Bennet's clause was ironclad.

Elizabeth's paltry fifty pounds a year from her father was safe from him, along with her garnet necklace and muslin dresses. Yes, he certainly would not wish to take those from her.

Once again, Wickham had failed. With so little money at her disposal, his future wife could not even afford to give him a farthing. Oh, how he wished to be a fly on the wall when the news was broken to his nemesis. That alone would make up for the disappointment he felt whenever he thought of *her*.

He had been taken in by her fine eyes and pleasing figure. With clarity of hindsight, he

realized she had most likely argued with him knowing it would pique his interest. She was different from any other lady he'd ever known. At one time, he felt he was in great danger of liking her more than he should. It was one of the main reasons he'd pulled back from their nightly verbal skirmishes while she stayed at Netherfield Park. Little did he realize Wickham had coached her well. Her behavior had been calculated, knowing he would be drawn in by witty banter and heated debates, not by coy looks and agreeing with every word he uttered. If the desperate mothers of London had known this was what it took to capture the master of Pemberley's interest, they'd have bought out Hatchard's and hired every tutor available to teach their daughters politics and history.

His reverie was disrupted by a kick on the boot. He raised his eyes to see Richard standing beside his chair.

"I did greet you, but you were a million

miles away in thought.” His cousin sat opposite him and signaled for a brandy. “Now, what is this about you getting married? Shall I congratulate or commiserate?”

“Definitely commiserate.”

“Why? Is she as ugly as my brother?”

“No, she is a handsome woman.” He grudgingly had to admit. “She has to be. Wickham does not have dalliances with hideous creatures.”

“Wickham! What has he got to do with this?”

“This whole debacle happened after we had gone out onto the terrace while at Bingley’s ball. When Miss Elizabeth turned to speak, I saw a red-coated gentleman trying to hide behind some bushes. She then approached and conveniently tripped. Of course, I caught her. I could not let a lady fall to the ground and my button became caught in the lace of her bodice. She probably added the lace to make sure this happened.”

“Yes, I am sure all women place lace around the edges of her gown in hopes of tripping and snagging it on a man’s buttons,” Richard scoffed, not even trying to mask his sarcasm.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“No, I am trying to see reason instead of lashing out in anger. How do you know she is involved with Wickham?”

“We argued about him while dancing.”

“You danced?”

“I told you about Wickham and all you heard was that I danced.”

“Truly, Darcy, that is more earth shattering than you being compromised. One you chose to do, the other you did not. Extraordinary.”

“Can we focus on the problem at hand?” He pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off a tension headache. Or, a Richard headache. Both were annoying.

“Of course.”

“The mother had to be in on it because as soon as Miss Elizabeth tripped, she was the first one out on the terrace, leading the charge. Practically all of the guests poured outside after her as witnesses.” His conscience knocked at his memory, reminding him it was the words of Caroline Bingley which had sealed his fate, not the mother – of Elizabeth. Resolutely, he pushed that aside.

“So, there is no getting out of this?”

“None whatsoever if I wished to remain an honorable gentleman.”

“All right, then. What is it you want me to do? Take your bride out into the countryside and make sure she is never found?”

“No!” He was horrified his cousin would even suggest such a thing. “She stays at Pemberley until I am sure she is not bearing the devil’s spawn. As angry as I am with her, she is no more guilty than any other woman who fell for his charms. If I intend to have an heir, I will have to get over my revulsion of

touching something Wickham has enjoyed.”

“And your wife will not mind being left in Derbyshire for the rest of her adult life?”

“She is a country squire’s daughter and does not know any other way of life. In fact, she likes to walk, and there are plenty of paths on the estate. She will adjust.”

“When you wrote Mrs. Reynolds, did you ask her to carefully watch your wife for certain signs and symptoms?”

“I have not yet sent notice. Thank you for reminding me.”

“I want to know more about Wickham. Where did you say he was?” Richard took a sip of his brandy.

“He has entrenched himself in the ___shire militia in Meryton. If you thought he was potent with women as a mere pretend gentleman, you should see him all puffed up in his uniform. I am sure by now he has run up at least a couple hundred pounds in debt and has impregnated someone, mayhap even

my betrothed. I guess we will find out soon enough.”

He realized Richard was glowering at him.

“What?”

“Are you telling me you did not go to his superior officer and tell him about Wickham’s character? Did you at least tell the merchants not to extend him credit? Or caution the men you would have become acquainted with that they should keep their beloved daughters far, far away from him?”

“No, I could not risk him spreading rumors about Georgiana.”

“So, it sits well with you that honest merchants lose money and families are torn apart because their daughters are ruined by a rakehell we could have stopped.” Richard stood and towered over him. “I want you to go to your strongbox and gather together every vowel you have on him. Now that I know where that traitor has hidden, I am going to ride to this little town, stop in and chat with

his commanding officer, and with luck, have Wickham in chains before the day is through and on a transport or at the end of a short rope.”

“When can you go?”

“I cannot go sooner than the week before Christmas as that is when I have leave to be with family. I will sacrifice one of my days off to make sure this blackguard cannot hurt anyone further.”

“That is regrettable. I am to be married Tuesday; you could have stood up with me.”

“Sorry, old man. I cannot. Duties are duties. Is Georgiana going with – ”

“No!” Darcy took a deep breath to control his anger. “I will not subject her to *that* family or the chance of Wickham showing his face. I will go alone.”

“Does she even know you are getting married?”

“Again, no.”

“Please tell her before you travel back to

Derbyshire, or she will wonder who the strange woman is sleeping next to you in the mistress of Pemberley's bedchamber."

"I will tell her in my own time."

Richard only shook his head, letting his cousin know without words that he was playing with fire.

"Mayhap, while in Meryton, I will question our friend Wickham about your bride. It is imperative to discover if he did conspire to set up a compromise."

"And if he has?"

"Then, you will know for certain what type of woman you married." Richard stood to leave. "And if he hasn't, you will forever regret not taking the time to court your wife properly and help her maintain a modicum of dignity. You could always postpone the wedding until after my visit."

"Tempting, but I want this charade over with. As it is, the sword of Damocles hangs over my head. I wish to have some peace in

my life, and with her at Pemberley awaiting the verdict of whether she is with child or not, I can continue with some normalcy here in Town.”

His gut twisted at the thought of Elizabeth heavy with Wickham’s child. If she was his lover, could he ever take her as his true wife, or would the tender shoots of his affection be completely strangled by the weeds of hatred he held for that man?

Richard tutted and shook his head. “You have already cast judgment before the evidence has been gathered.” He turned to leave and tossed over his shoulder, “I hope you do not regret this.”

“I already do, cousin,” Darcy muttered under his breath. “I already do.”

Chapter Five

“Oh, Jane! This is such a dreadful business!” Mrs. Bennet entered the drawing room without even having removed her pelisse and bonnet so great was her agitation. “I have just returned from my sister’s, and she told me that she had heard from Mrs. Long, who heard from her maid that Netherfield Park has been closed. Mr. Bingley has left Hertfordshire!”

“Everybody? Even his sisters?”

“Did you not hear what I said, Lizzy? Mr. Bingley has left for London!”

~ ~ ~

“Well, Lizzy,” said Mrs. Bennet later that same day as she and her niece sewed in the little family parlor, “what is your opinion now of this sad business of Jane’s? For my part, I am determined never to speak of it again to

anybody. Mr. Bingley is a very undeserving young man, and I do not suppose there is the least chance in the world of her ever getting him now. There is no talk of his coming to Netherfield again this winter.”

“I do not believe that he will ever live at Netherfield anymore.”

“Are you aware of something I do not know?”

“I am trying to see this in a rational manner. He is a great friend of Mr. Darcy’s, and as you know, Mr. Darcy is very upset over this rushed marriage. Mr. Bingley will do nothing to make his friend even angrier. He is like Jane in that way. He prefers smooth waters to a tumultuous sea.”

“Oh, well! it is just as he chooses. Though I shall always say that he used my daughter extremely ill, and if I was her, I would not have put up with it. Well, my comfort is, I am sure Jane will die of a broken heart, and then he will be sorry for what he has done.”

Elizabeth knew her aunt had expressed herself poorly, but she also knew her adopted mother truly worried over her eldest daughter's heartache. She did as well.

"I was going to direct Mr. Collins's attention toward your sister. If Mr. Bingley is not going to court her, she may as well have her cousin to wed. He can no longer embrace any thoughts of marriage in your direction."

"Auntie! Jane will not entertain the idea. She is still very much in love with Mr. Bingley even if he does not return her affection. She cannot even begin to think of marrying another."

"And why not? She is not getting any younger and beauty such as hers will fade, then no one will make an offer. She should make Mr. Collins ask her to marry."

"No!"

Mrs. Bennet gasped at her outburst. Elizabeth took a deep breath and willed herself not to panic, to answer in a calm voice

and allay her aunt's fears.

"You forget I am marrying a wealthy man. I will ensure Jane meets a suitable gentleman," she soothed, hiding her crossed fingers within the folds of her skirt.

At this juncture, her aunt need not know Mr. Darcy had forbidden her to contact family, and she would never be in a position to help Jane from that quarter. Still, she could not, in good conscience, assign her cousin to a fate worse than death. Mr. Collins would ride roughshod over her good heart, and she'd be at the beck and call of the haughty Lady Catherine. Jane's gentle spirit would be crushed.

Instead, she would ask Uncle Gardiner to bring her favorite cousin to London. Maybe there she might meet a nice gentleman who knew nothing about the Bennet family's slightly tarnished reputation, or even better, someone who didn't care. It was sometime later that she and Jane had a chance to speak

privately in their own room.

“Tell me truly, dear Jane. Are you much distressed over Mr. Bingley leaving in such an abrupt fashion?”

“I have not said anything to Mama, but a letter was delivered to me from Netherfield the afternoon following the ball,” Jane said, taking from her pocket a letter, which already showed some sign of wear. “This is from Caroline Bingley and what it contains surprised me a good deal. The whole party have left Netherfield and are on their way to town; without any intention of coming back again. You shall hear what she says.” She began to read.

“I am sure you are surprised to receive correspondence from me, given what happened last evening. By the time you receive this note, Netherfield is in the process of being closed permanently. I will not pretend to regret anything I leave in

Hertfordshire. Regardless of your valiant efforts to curry favor and forge a friendship with my sister and me, I am pleased to inform you that, in this venture, you have been quite unsuccessful.”

To these horrific expressions, Elizabeth listened with a growing rage. To spew such venom – to Jane of all people! – it was beyond the pale.

“These are her sentiments alone, Jane. Mr. Bingley is his own man and hopefully will come to his own conclusions.” Lizzy consoled, after a short pause, not daring to express her thoughts that he was very much under the thumb of not only his sister but also Mr. Darcy. And she knew they would harangue him day and night to forget about his angel from Hertfordshire.

“Thank you for those kind words, Lizzy, but Caroline decidedly says that none of the

party will return to Hertfordshire this winter. I will read it to you.”

“We made the decision to remove ourselves to London where we can enjoy a society that is so much greater than Meryton’s, and more specifically, removes ourselves from your family’s desperate bid for better connections.”

“You cannot argue they have no intention of returning to Hertfordshire,” added Jane.

“It is only evident to me that Miss Bingley does not intend to return.”

“It gets worse, Lizzy. I will read you the passage which particularly hurts me. I will have no reserves from you.”

There was more to hurt her sister? The above had already done enough damage. Jane continued to read out loud,

“Mr. Darcy is quite impatient to see his sister, and to confess the truth, we are all

so very eager to resume our warm friendship and are excited to welcome Georgiana as our sister. Her relations all wish the connection as much as our own. Given that our brother is at Darcy House almost every day, he will have frequent opportunities to see his beloved in the most intimate of situations. I know you aspired beyond your reach, but my brother would never have degraded our family by linking the names of Bennet and Bingley when Darcy and Bingley are so much more superior.

Do not attempt to contact me, Miss Bennet. Your letters will be burned, unopened, and if by chance I see you on the street, I will not acknowledge you by any form of address.”

“What think you of this, Lizzy?” Jane asked, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“Is it not clear enough? Does it not expressly declare that Caroline neither expected nor wished me to be her sister. Can there be any other opinion on the subject?”

“No, I am afraid I cannot. This distresses me almost as much as you. You did nothing wrong. Mr. Bingley and his sisters should not treat you with such disdain as Mr. Darcy is saving our family from ruin by marrying me. It is obvious Miss Bingley exerts great influence on her brother and mayhap it is good you know this now. If you had married him, she would have been the second wife in the marriage without all the intimate benefits.”

“Lizzy!”

“What? You know that is true. I think you dodged a lot of heartache by learning of his weak nature. We should look to the good side of this coin and disregard the bad.”

“What good can come from this, sister of my heart?”

“You are free to marry anyone you like. I have the means to ensure you have a wonderful time in London this spring and have asked Uncle Gardiner if you can return to London with them after Christmas. I am sure they will not say no.”

“I cannot use Mr. Darcy’s money,” Jane protested. “He would for certain think we are mercenary.”

“I have a small secret that I will share with you fully once you are in London, but I can tell you that I will not be spending Mr. Darcy’s money but my own.”

“Your money, whatever do you mean?”

“I have money from when my own dear father died. I will give some to you.”

“I cannot take your money either.”

“You will have no choice. It is a gift, and you will offend me by not accepting.”

“Lizzy...” Jane began to protest again, but Elizabeth covered her mouth with the palm of her hand.

“It is a gift. You will accept this.” She removed her hand. “Do not tell your mother. She has no idea. Only Uncle Bennet and Uncle Gardiner – and I suppose Aunt Gardiner as he keeps no secrets from her – know of my inheritance. Promise you will not tell a soul?”

“I promise,” Jane said with a sad little smile.

“Pinkie swears?”

“Pinkie swears.”

She and Jane entwined their little fingers and squeezed them together.

“You shall be well, Jane. I have confidence in you.”

Chapter Six

Elizabeth settled the last of her accounts in the shops of Meryton, not wanting to leave behind any outstanding debts prior to her marriage. The last shop she entered was the modiste.

“Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, I had hoped to see you before the day was out. I received a shipment of those bonnets and muffs I had spoken to you of.”

“They are here?”

“Yes, would you like to see them?”

“Of course. If they match the outfits we settled on last Wednesday, I will have you add them to the order, and Papa will have someone from Longbourn come and pick them up on Tuesday next, as planned.”

“Then, come this way.”

Mrs. Henshaw drew back a curtain and led Elizabeth to a storage area in the back, Jane following close behind. On a long table, several muffs, elegant bonnets, gloves, and stockings were laid out. Hanging up were some pelisses and redingotes.

“Oh, Lizzy. They are beautiful. How in the world can you choose just one?”

“I have no intention of choosing just one.”

“But...,” Jane lowered her voice so Mrs. Henshaw could not overhear her. “You are only allowed to take a small trunk.”

“Fear not, Jane. I have a plan and will not suffer for any great length of time and will most definitely not fear the cold with this.”

She picked up a muff and pushed her hands inside. Yes, this would do nicely. She turned and asked Mrs. Henshaw if she could try on the cardinal redingote which had caught her eye as soon as she entered the room.

“Most assuredly, Miss Elizabeth.”

She brought down the coat and after Elizabeth had shed her heavy pelisse, slid her arms into the redingote. It fit almost perfectly. No adjustments would be necessary.

“I will take this with me today, Mrs. Henshaw, along with the muff and two pairs of the ivory stockings.” She turned to Jane. “Is there anything you need, Jane? Would you like a muff?”

“Oh no, Lizzy. I could not infringe on your kindness.”

For one brief moment, Lizzy regretted telling Jane of her self reliance.

“Nonsense. The other girls shall receive theirs in due time. Mrs. Henshaw has guaranteed them to be delivered to Longbourn for Christmas. You are receiving your gift early because I so dearly want to see you smile.”

Jane’s eyes welled with tears at the reminder that Lizzy was forbidden from contacting family after her marriage.

“Then, how could I refuse,” she said and squeezed Lizzy’s hand.

“Remember to hide it from Lydia until after Christmas. She is like a squirrel. Always stealing things and hiding them in obscure places.”

“That she does.”

Elizabeth ordered a few more things, ensuring the ones she had purchased for gifts would be wrapped nicely, and then she and Jane left the shop. Within minutes they were settled in the carriage, their packages piled on the squab across from them.

“Elizabeth.” Jane never called her by her full name unless worried – or angry, which was thankfully rare. “Have you been supplementing Longbourn with your money?”

“No. There is no need. Neither Longbourn nor uncle has required any funds from me. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I have heard people whisper about how we are not wealthy and have very poor

dowries to entice any gentleman to make us an offer of marriage..." she trailed off and turned her attention to outside the carriage window.

"Do you think that is one of the reasons why Mr. Bingley left Hertfordshire?"

"Other than the obvious?"

"Yes."

"If it wasn't our lack of money, then I can only say it had to be the behavior of Mama and my sisters, for Mr. Darcy *is* marrying you and that alone removes the stain of you being thought a fallen woman.

Soon, she and Jane were back at Longbourn and joined Mrs. Bennet and Mary for a welcome cup of tea. Aunt Francis was still quite distressed over the rush of the marriage and the fact there would be no announcements, nor was she able to give Lizzy a proper send off with an elaborate breakfast after the ceremony.

"Auntie," she soothed as best she could.

“Mr. Darcy is not happy about this alliance and wishes to expedite all the legalities. Also, it is a full three-day journey to Derbyshire, and the earlier we leave, the faster we arrive.”

“We are your family, Elizabeth,” her aunt huffed out. “I do not understand why we could not read the banns and have a proper ceremony. By rushing this marriage, Mr. Darcy is making it appear as though you behaved in a wanton manner. It is not right.”

She appreciated her aunt’s concerns, but any reply she might have made was stalled when Mr. Collins joined them. He appeared quite agitated.

“Cousin Elizabeth, I could not help but hear your mother’s concerns, and I must say I concur. Mr. Darcy has long been engaged to my esteemed patroness’s daughter Anne. I have made Lady Catherine aware of his proposal, and I am sure she will make her displeasure known and will stop the proceedings.” He twisted his hands together in

a state of distress. “I would not hold out hope that Mr. Darcy returns as expected next Tuesday.”

“Mr. Collins!” Mrs. Bennet cried out. “Why would you do that? If Mr. Darcy does not return and marry Lizzy, we are all ruined!”

“I had to follow my conscience and protect the welfare of my benefactress.”

Mr. Collins truly did look quite upset.

“But we are your family, Mr. Collins,” her aunt wailed. “We should have priority over some woman who has no connection to us and no say in how we live our lives.” She cast a fevered eye toward her eldest daughter, and Lizzy took hold of Jane’s hand while shaking her head at Mrs. Bennet. There would be no sacrificial lamb brought to the slaughter today. “Are you still willing to marry one of my daughters, Mr. Collins? Would you help us maintain our dignity?”

Mr. Collins’s mouth opened and closed a few times, and a dull red crept up his neck and

covered his cheeks. Mrs. Bennet immediately discerned that her husband's cousin would not save the family from disgrace if Mr. Darcy did, indeed, not return as promised.

“I see. Thank you for your concern, Mr. Collins.”

“Mrs. Bennet, I cannot offer to marry cousin Elizabeth as I am promised to another.”

“Excuse me?”

“I offered for Miss Charlotte Lucas while at Lucas Lodge the other evening, and she most readily said yes.” He cast a beseeching look at Elizabeth, who gave him a small smile of encouragement. “She is a most gracious lady, and I know we will be very happy.”

“Mr. Collins, may I be the first of our family to wish you joy?” Elizabeth said, followed by Jane.

“We are ruined, Elizabeth! How can you wish him joy?”

“Mr. Collins is not responsible for what has happened, and I know Charlotte will make

a wonderful parson's wife. I bear my cousin no ill will."

All conversation came to a halt as her aunt called for her salts, and Lydia and Kitty came into the room, laughing over something the officers said the other day when they were in town shopping. Mr. Collins took this opportunity to excuse himself, saying he was going to tell Mr. Bennet the news and go to Lucas Lodge to dine with his prospective new family.

"Oh, Lizzy! we are ruined. Mr. Darcy will not return, and all you girls will be shunned." Aunt Francis tugged a lace handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed her eyes. "Mr. Bennet will have to call him out, and he will be killed, and Mr. Collins will toss us all out before he is cold in the grave! Oh, my nerves! I feel such fluttering and spasms. Hill! Hill! Where are my salts?"

Elizabeth and Jane rose in tandem and quit the room.

“Do you think Mr. Darcy will bow to his aunt’s demands?” Jane asked once they were safe in their room.

“As you well know, Mr. Darcy answers to no one. He has already prepared the settlement, and by now, his solicitors have it ready for signing. Also, too many people were witnesses to the compromise, and we live close to London. The rumors will not stay within our shire, much as I would like them to. He is honor bound to marry, as am I.”

“For the sake of our reputations and yours, I hope he does return and, over time, get over his great anger and realize what a wonderful treasure you are.”

“Thank you, Jane, but this treasure is well hidden, and without a map Mr. Darcy may never find it. Maybe in ten years, he might thaw, but I will not wait with bated breath for that to happen.”

Jane gave her an impulsive hug. “I will still pray for your happiness. Miracles always

have a way of happening when you least expect them.”

“From your lips to God’s ear, pray away.”

~ ~ ~

Although the invitation to dine, extended prior to leaving Netherfield, was meant only for his good friend, Bingley sent a note saying that Caroline had caught wind of his attending Darcy’s home and invited herself along, which then morphed into Hurst and his wife being added to the guest list.

How could he decline without giving a good reason? Their friendship was casual, and spur of the moment changes to dinner plans was not unusual. He had the good sense to advise his sister they would have company that evening, then instructed Mrs. Whittaker to inform the cook of three extra guests.

At precisely seven o’clock, because Darcy House was the only establishment Miss Bingley attended on time, Darcy greeted his

guests. The whole week had been surreal, and it was hard to believe it had only been four days since he'd last spoken with Charles. It felt more like years.

“Mr. Darcy! Upon my word, every time I enter your delightful townhouse, I feel such an affinity for your dear late mother’s exquisite taste.” Were the first words out of Miss Bingley’s mouth as she entered the drawing room “The décor is so refined and elegant. Why your future wife will have almost next to nothing to do with regard to making changes.”

His wife would have nothing to do with making changes. She would be far, far away in Pemberley and never darken the door to Darcy House for many years. Bingley and his sisters, along with Hurst, made themselves comfortable. Miss Bingley cornered Georgiana and pestered her with her studies and how her lessons were going with her music master. He took note of her proprietary behavior and thought he'd have another talk with Bingley

but then paused. He would be off the marriage carousel in a few short days and Miss Bingley would no longer be able to think of herself as the next Mistress of Pemberley. At least one good thing was coming out of this sham of a marriage.

Needing a semblance of normality, wishing all was as it had been prior to his departure to Hertfordshire a few months ago, he did his best to put his troubles on the back shelf and enjoy the meal and conversation. That evening after everyone had dined, they eschewed the separation of the sexes – he had no intention of leaving Georgiana alone with Bingley’s sisters – and all of them gathered in the drawing room. Georgiana had agreed to play while he, Bingley, and Caroline chatted. Hurst relaxed on the couch, as per normal, and Louisa played with her bracelets.

Although he made every attempt to follow along in the conversation, he could not rid his thoughts of his upcoming marriage. Slow

anger took root in his belly every time he thought of Miss Elizabeth Bennet and Wickham entrapping him in their scheme. He, who had successfully outmaneuvered the most cunning of mothers in town, as well as the grasping claws of one determined Miss Bingley, had managed to become trapped by an impertinent miss who had at one time caught his attention.

His continuous thoughts of Richard traveling to Meryton also weighed heavy on his mind. Although grateful the problem of Wickham was finally being dealt with, it did nothing to quell the disquiet he felt about learning the truth – good or bad – of what role his future wife had played in their compromise. Because his mind was on these past events, he inadvertently brought the subject of Bingley's lease into the conversation.

“Have you written your solicitor to quit the lease on Netherfield?

“I cannot do anything as of yet. There is a clause whereupon I have to keep the lease for a minimum of six months or forfeit the whole year in pecuniary damages.”

Darcy was beginning to hate that word, *clause*. It made him think of Bennet’s pitiful attempt to save a few measly pounds for his daughter’s financial security.

“Throwing good money after bad, old chum?”

“I liked Meryton. I had no complaints about the area or my immediate neighbors.”

“There are some *immediate* neighbors I am glad to say we will never have to see or speak with again.” Miss Bingley exclaimed. “For the most part it was as Mr. Darcy said, they were a collection of people in whom there was little beauty and no fashion.”

“There was beauty, Caroline. You chose not to see it,” chastised her brother.

“They were vulgar and uncouth. Why, they thought Miss Eliza was – what did Sir

William say about her? – Oh, yes. She was the unheralded jewel of the county. What a laugh. For my own part, I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her face was too thin; her complexion too dark with no brilliancy, and her features were not at all handsome. Her teeth were tolerable, I suppose, and as for her eyes, which have sometimes been called “so fine” – here she slid a provocative glance in Darcy’s direction – “I never could perceive anything extraordinary in them.” Miss Bingley chose at this time to face Darcy in full, her eyes glittering in triumph over her perceived rival for his attention. “I particularly recollect your saying one night that you could scarce believe she was thought of as beautiful!”

A small measure of shame rose in his chest over the words Miss Bingley threw back in his face. Miss Bingley, receiving no praise or condemnation for her words, continued with, “Thank goodness you did not stay behind to

marry that chit, Mr. Darcy.”

“And how do you know I won’t?” At Caroline’s raised brow, Darcy added, “Marry her, that is. Have you received correspondence citing the opposite from her sister and your friend, Miss Bennet?”

“Jane Bennet is no friend of mine and I doubt that little mouse will ever have the temerity to write. I informed her, in no uncertain terms, any letter received from her would be consigned to the fire unread and if she attempted to speak with me or my family, I would cut her direct.” Miss Bingley said in a firm voice. “As it stands, Charles followed your lead and did not even say his farewells to that horrible family.”

“True, Darcy. At one time, I had seriously considered offering for Miss Bennet, but knowing you did not offer to marry Miss Elizabeth after the compromise, I could not take the risk of being censured.”

The discordant bang of piano keys cut the

air. Darcy looked to his sister, who now stood by the pianoforte, visibly shaking.

“Georgiana!” He had forgotten she was in the room.

“You compromised a lady and refused to marry her?” his sister asked, her voice betraying a slight tremor.

He had no answer.

“She was no lady, dear, dear Georgiana....”

“Did I ask your opinion, Miss Bingley? I believe I was speaking with my brother.”

Never had he seen his sister in such a fury.

“Now is not the time or place – ” he started to say, only for Georgiana to break in.

“I know very well what I have witnessed, Fitzwilliam. You openly mocked and gloated over the fall of a lady with your friends.”

“Georgiana, please go to your room.”

“Is this the same Miss Elizabeth you once described in glowing terms? You wrote of her wit, her willingness to debate, and especially

how you enjoyed her singing and playing. Are you all speaking of *that* Miss Elizabeth?”

“Oh, please,” Miss Bingley scoffed, “She was just another piece of muslin Mr. Wickham used to dig at your brother.”

Georgiana gasped and turned chalk white, but not from shock. Darcy could tell. No, she was absolutely livid. He silently cursed Bingley and his penchant for keeping nothing from his sister.

“Go to your room, Georgiana. Now,” he said in a quieter tone. When she continued to stare him down, he added, “Please.”

If he wasn’t so angry at Miss Bingley, Elizabeth and yes, even Charles, he would have stood and applauded the fact his sister seemed to have shed the mantle of her shyness. All in the name of a woman he had written about in a few short passages.

“I have always looked up to you, believing you could do no wrong. But to think that you, of all people, would not do the honorable

thing... with a gentleman's daughter, no less." Darcy took a step toward her, and her chin jutted out in a rare show of stubbornness. "I am going, Brother. Do not come and wish me goodnight."

She took no leave of their guests and sailed through the room; her head held high. She looked so much like their mother his heart ached. Following in her shadow was Mrs. Annesley, who dared give him a grim look as well. Not only had he lost the approbation of his much beloved sister, but also of her respected companion.

"You wrote of Eliza Bennet in glowing terms?" Caroline cried out in astonishment once Georgiana had quit the room. "I believe the world has stopped spinning on its axis."

"Not now, Caroline," Charles said, clearly understanding the shock Darcy felt at his sister's rare act of defiance.

Darcy fervently wished his friend had come alone without his family in tow. What

should have been a night of strict confidences being shared had become a comedy of errors, and he now had to deal with a sister who thought him the worst of cads. Even more so than George Wickham in her eyes. He had much to explain on the morrow.

“I do not think it would be remiss if I called an end to this evening.”

“Of course, Darcy. We shall leave immediately.”

“Mr. Darcy, prior to all of this unpleasantness, I had a lovely evening.” Miss Bingley approached, stopping too close for comfort. “Next time we are together, I can safely promise I will never bring up that impertinent chit. You and I have other more delightful topics of conversation to canvas.”

He watched in morbid fascination as she fluttered her eyelashes in an open show of coquetry. A ploy he found more offensive than appealing. As soon as the door closed behind them, Darcy made his way upstairs and

knocked on Georgiana's door. Mrs. Annesley, after some length of time, opened it slightly and informed him that his sister had retired and had no wish to speak with him. Her grave countenance hinted broadly of her disenchantment with her employer. He stepped away with the sense he had been silently chastened for behaving badly. Something which had not happened since he was in short pants. The feeling was decidedly uncomfortable.

The next morning, his valet handed him a note from Georgiana. His sister had removed herself to his uncle's house. Her anger grieved him and after breaking his fast, he decided to pen a note telling his sister that he would explain everything when next he saw her, which wouldn't be for at least a week as he had business to take care of, and left it at that. She did not need to know the week would be spent establishing his new wife at Pemberley.

The earl begged to differ and a summons

to dinner at Matlock House arrived before he finished eating.

~ ~ ~

“Lord and Lady Matlock await you in the green drawing room, Mr. Darcy,” Matlock’s butler informed him as a footman divested him of his outerwear.

In an unconscious effort to steel his nerves for what he suspected, Darcy squared his shoulders and tugged down his waistcoat. Upon entering the drawing room, he was greeted by a bevy of unhappy faces, the most distraught being his sister’s, who sat close to Aunt Lucinda, the Countess of Matlock, and would not even raise her gaze to him. He had disappointed her deeply, he knew. By the end of the day, he hoped he would begin to salvage the relationship with his most beloved sister.

“Uncle Robert, Aunt Lucinda,” he said by way of greeting. “Georgiana, I am glad you

made it safe to our uncle's house."

"Before we go to dinner," Uncle Robert began, "I will have a word with you."

Darcy gave a curt nod of agreement and followed his uncle down the hall to his study. As soon as the door closed, his uncle turned and said, "What in god's teeth is going on?"

He stomped to the far side of the room and brought out two cut glass tumblers. "Georgiana arrived here this morning in tears, blubbering about a compromise. Lucinda and I thought she was talking about that reprobate Wickham and began to console her, only to find out she was not aware we knew about Ramsgate, which caused her to cry even harder. Between the hiccups and the wailing, we finally discovered that you – you, Darcy! – have compromised a gentleman's daughter and refuse to marry her!"

"I *am* marrying her," he managed to say once his uncle had calmed down. Uncle Robert handed him a full glass of brandy and sat

down heavily behind his desk. Darcy took the chair opposite. "I am surprised Richard did not tell you, I saw him at White's the day after the compromise."

"We have not seen Richard for weeks. They captured some high-ranking spies and have had their hands full with interrogations. If you *are* marrying the chit, then why is Georgiana so upset?"

"I had the Bingley's over for dinner last night and the topic of the compromise came up."

"They are aware of the compromise?"

"It happened at a ball Bingley hosted."

"I assume there were plenty of witnesses?"

"Yes."

Lord Matlock took a sip of his drink.

"Explain why Georgiana thinks you will not marry this lady."

"I cannot say she is a lady," Darcy muttered bitterly.

"Is she a gentleman's daughter?"

“Barely.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Her mother has connections to trade and a more uncouth woman I have never met.”

“You mean, other than Catherine?”

Almost against his will, the corner of his mouth tugged upward. “On par with Aunt Catherine.”

“The father is a gentleman? Does he have an estate?”

“His estate is called Longbourn. Of decent size and entailed.”

“No sons I take it.”

“Mr. Bennet is saddled with five daughters and never have I witnessed so much ill-bred behavior in one family. The two youngest are ripe for the picking and one could safely bet they will be heavy with child before the beginning of summer.”

“That is a harsh statement, Darcy. But for the grace of God, that could have been Georgiana’s fate. Poor choices are made not

only by the ill-bred daughters.”

“Do not bring Georgiana’s folly into this conversation. She was led astray by that wastrel Wickham.”

“I never understood what your father saw in him. Let us not get side-tracked. This is about your future wife. How did you meet her? What led to the compromise?”

“My very first night in Hertfordshire I discovered that Bingley had accepted an invitation to the local quarterly assembly. As he was anxious to meet his new neighbors, I agreed.”

“Knowing your friend, he would also have been on the lookout for his next angel. Am I wrong in that assessment?”

“No, you are not. Unfortunately, his attention settled on the eldest Miss Bennet.”

“Really? They have a beautiful daughter?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Bingley only chases beautiful blonde angels. He settles for nothing else.” His uncle

took a sip of his drink. “And if I am not mistaken in my understanding of how new gossip is feasted upon, Bingley’s wealth would have been common knowledge before he had even moved in, whetting the appetite of desperate mothers and fathers.”

“I myself heard titters of ten thousand a year as soon as we entered the room.”

“Nothing you have not heard before and we all know it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

“I was most definitely not looking for a wife. It was the furthest thing from my mind.”

“Then, I can only imagine how trapped you felt when these Bennets pushed their daughter beneath your nose every chance they got. You are far wealthier than Bingley and already have an impressive estate. No parent worth their salt would let you escape their notice.”

An uneasy realization settled in his chest.

During his time in Meryton, no mother – or father, for that matter – had ever directed his attention to their daughters. And there were plenty of single young ladies, what with most men fighting in France. In fact, the ill-mannered Mrs. Bennet had looked upon him with derision.

“I will admit, they did not focus their attention on me.”

“How singular. A mother of five unwed daughters with an entailed estate, and she did not extol upon their virtues and accomplishments?” The earl carefully placed his drink in front of him and leaned forward on his elbows. “Surely, as it was the first time you were acquainted, she wished for you to dance with one of her daughters.”

“After Bingley asked the eldest Miss Bennet for the next set, Mrs. Bennet asked if I enjoyed dancing.”

“That is all? She made a polite inquiry of whether you liked dancing?”

“I knew it was a blatant attempt to force me to partner with one of her uncouth daughters. I quit her company and moved to the other side of the room.”

“Where, I am sure, with your well-known cherubic like demeanor, conversed with any or all who stood by you.”

“You know I did not. I was quite satisfied with my own company until Bingley intruded and demanded I dance. He even tried to turn my attention to Miss Elizabeth. She is the second eldest Miss Bennet. I stopped him cold by saying she was not handsome enough to tempt me and he would be better served paying compliments to his own partner.”

“I have a sneaking suspicion you made sure the lady involved heard you. I am no longer surprised no one sought your attention for their daughters.”

“During our six weeks there, Mrs. Bennet focused all her energies on Bingley. She was quite vociferous in her hope of my friend

offering for her eldest daughter. I am positive her joy was compounded by the compromise Miss Elizabeth successfully executed at Bingley's ball."

"A compromise witnessed by many and you still have not answered why Georgiana believes you did not offer marriage to a gentleman's daughter."

"I may have allowed the Bingleys to believe I left Hertfordshire without speaking to Miss Elizabeth's father."

"Why would you do that? The minute your wife arrives on your arm in town... ah, I see... you intend to squirrel her away at Pemberley." Darcy shifted uncomfortably in his chair and nodded. "You mentioned the mother thought Bingley would marry her eldest."

"I am positive if this incident had not occurred, Bingley would have offered for Miss Bennet."

"And with you making them believe the

family's reputation was ruined he did not stick around in case the stain spread to his family."

"Correct."

"And what of the elder Miss Bennet? Were her feelings engaged?"

"I do not believe they were."

"But you are not one hundred percent guaranteed of that, are you?"

"I am not."

"You said, *Miss Elizabeth* compromised *you*."

"An opportune stumble on the terrace and she fell into my arms. The lace on her gown conveniently caught my button and tore."

His uncle stared at the ceiling, seemingly deep in thought. "Were you not leery that something like this might happen when she asked you to join her outside?"

"She did not request my presence, I followed," he explained. "I thought she would catch a chill."

Uncle Robert snapped his attention to him.

“You followed her.”

It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes.”

His uncle began to laugh. Brow furrowed, Darcy could only watch and wonder what was going on in his uncle’s mind. Finally, the earl stood and held out his hand. Surprised, Darcy put down his drink and accepted the handshake.

“I wish you well in your marriage, Darcy,” he said before exiting the room. “You are going to need it.”

He followed his uncle to the drawing room to discover that Georgiana had excused herself from dining with family and had taken a tray in her room. His conversation and apologies would have to wait until he returned from Derbyshire.

~ ~ ~

Monday morning, Darcy was finishing up some correspondence prior to attending his

solicitor's office when the strident tones of Aunt Catherine boomed from the foyer. For a brief moment he was thankful Georgiana was not there to witness what he knew would be an unpleasant encounter. She did not need to be subjected to the fury he expected from his least favorite relative.

“Where is my nephew! I demand to see him at once!”

The thud of her walking stick as it hit the marble floor echoed in the short hall leading to his study and he knew that somehow, she had learned of his pending marriage. How, he did not know. Even if Uncle Robert had sent an express this morning, which he assured him he would not, there was no physical way any letter could arrive at Rosings until at least noon.

Aunt Catherine burst through the door and he calmly finished sanding the letter to his steward and placed it atop the one to Mrs. Reynolds. He dared not show any weakness.

Aunt Catherine had the instincts of a wild animal. One wrong move and she'd pounce for the kill.

"You can be at no loss, nephew, to understand the reason of my journey hither," she said upon her immediate entry into the room.

"Indeed, you are mistaken, aunt. I cannot account why you have honored me with your presence this fine morning."

"A report of a most alarming nature reached me two days ago," replied her ladyship, in an angry tone, "I was told you are planning to bind yourself in marriage to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood, I instantly resolved on setting off to uncover the truth of the matter."

"I wonder that you took the trouble at all when a letter would have sufficed."

"I came at once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted."

"I am not prepared to discuss my personal

life with you, Aunt Catherine. May I offer you a beverage before you leave?”

“This is not to be borne. I insist on being satisfied. Are you engaged to Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

“As stated previously, I am *not* discussing my personal life. The topic is closed, our conversation is complete.”

“If you marry that tart from Hertfordshire, I will take you to the courts and have it annulled.”

“On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that you are engaged to Anne.”

“I do not recall proposing marriage to my cousin. No settlements have been drawn up. No promises were made, by either myself or my parents. There has never been an engagement between me and Anne, other than in your fevered imagination.”

“You know full well your betrothal is of a peculiar kind. Have you not heard me say that

from your earliest hours you were destined for your cousin?”

“From my earliest hours, aunt? I am barely three years older than Anne. She was not even born in my earliest hours. I highly doubt my mother would plot the marriage of her son to an unborn entity. Anne may well have been a son. Your argument has as much strength as a house of cards on a windy day.” He stood and moved around the desk toward the door.

“If you marry that unknown upstart, you will be censured, slighted, and despised, by everyone connected with you. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never be mentioned by any of us.”

“Us, as in the Fitzwilliams?”

“Yes, they will cut you off and set you adrift.”

“I am independently wealthy with my own connections and am a Darcy. I am fond of my mother’s family but do not depend on them. I

will not be harmed if they never mention me in conversation.”

“I am not in the habit of brooking disappointment.”

“Today is a chance for you to learn something new.”

“If you were sensible, you would not wish your betrothed to quit her own sphere.”

“She is a gentleman’s daughter.”

“True, but who is her mother? Her uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their low brow connections.”

He briefly wondered how she could know of Elizabeth’s origins and family dynamics.

“If I do not object, they can mean nothing to you.”

Lady Catherine glared at him. “Do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. I shall not go away till you have given me the assurance I require.”

“Then, I shall have Mrs. Whittaker prepare you a room. Good day, aunt.”

“Not so hasty, if you please. I have by no means done. To all the objections I have already urged, I have still another to add. I am no stranger to the particulars of your hastily arranged engagement. How the light skirt forced you into a compromise. I know it all. What I do not understand is why you cannot just set her up in a little house and take your pleasure whenever you like. You need not marry your ladybird. Heaven and earth! — of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?”

He gave a start at his exact words being echoed by his aunt.

“I am tired of this conversation and have a business appointment to attend.”

“You have no regard, then, for the honor and credit of our family!” Her ladyship was highly incensed. “Do you not consider that a connection with her will disgrace you in the eyes of everybody?”

“I have nothing further to say. You know

my sentiments.”

“You refuse, then, to oblige me.” At his curt nod, she continued, “I hoped to find you reasonable, but you are stubborn, just like your father.” She pivoted on her heel and strode through the door, her voice ringing down the hall. “I take no leave of you, Darcy. You deserve no such attention. I am most seriously displeased.”

The thumps of her walking stick and vociferous displeasure soon receded and Darcy could only wonder, *how did she learn of my circumstance so quickly?* It seemed as though news of his impending marriage had spread at least as far as Kent.

His plan to tuck Miss Elizabeth away at Pemberley was starting to unravel like a ball of yarn in the care of a frisky kitten. He must now endure her company in London. Blast Aunt Catherine and her infernal interference. If only he had disabused her of that stupid engagement years ago.

He picked up the letter written to Mrs. Reynolds and consigned it to the fire. He no longer needed to inform her of a new mistress. Instead, Elizabeth would reside at Darcy House until he knew for sure if she were *enceinte*. If she carried Wickham's bastard... he pressed his fist to the center of his chest at a sudden tightening. He could not bear the thought of her carrying another man's child. He would cross that bridge when, or if he came to it.

Prior to leaving for Matlock House, he ordered all his mother's furniture removed from the mistress chambers to the attic and replaced with whatever remained upstairs. He could not bear that woman to sully the cherished memory of his mother.

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"You have everything in place?"

"I believe so. There have never been so many express posts sent to and from

Longbourn as there have been this past week, and Aunt Maddie has promised to write to her brother with all the details.”

“And your trunks?”

“I have my one trunk ready and Mr. Potter and his son know to follow the carriage at a safe distance and at my signal, attend the next day. There is a lovely inn at Lambton, I am told and I have given them enough funds to safely carry them through the week.”

“It seems you have all things in hand, Lizzy.”

“Engage people with what they expect; it is what they are able to discern and confirms their projections. It settles them into predictable patterns of response, occupying their minds while you wait for the extraordinary moment — that which they cannot anticipate.”

“My brother James loved that book. Next to the *Holy Bible*, the *Art of War* was his most treasured possession.”

“I have both packed in my trunk and feel

exactly the same.”

“Next to Lizzy Izzy?”

Elizabeth smiled at the reference to her treasured doll Papa had given her before he left so many years ago.

“Yes, she is safely tucked away in my trunk.”

“Ah, Lizzy. If James and Isabella could only see how well you have grown up. I know they would be troubled over the way your marriage has come about, but of you, as a person, they would be so proud.”

“My biggest regret is that I am not marrying for love. It was my deepest held wish to have a marriage like my parents.”

“Did I ever tell you that your parents very nearly did not get married?”

“No.”

“As you well know, your grandfather de Cortez was an important man with great plans for his only daughter. Plans that did not include the second son of a gentleman in

England. Although James was wealthy in his own right as captain of a ship, he still fell far below the social ring your mother traveled in Spain. And yet my brother persevered. You have the same tenacity as your father – and of your mother. Isabella went against her father's wishes and pushed to marry James.

Thankfully, de Cortez relented and he never regretted them having a beautiful daughter of their own."

"I barely remember him. I was twelve when he last visited. He was tall and swarthy, so very aristocratic."

"Aye. He scared Fanny into good behavior for those two months. It was his greatest wish to see you married, unfortunately, he died before that came about."

"I do miss his letters." She turned her focus back to her upcoming nuptials. "I sent a note to Hertford House, informing the ambassador of my marriage. José and Sophia will be surprised, I am sure by the news, but

details are required to update the royal archive. I also had to let them know I could no longer accompany them to Spain this summer.”

“I wonder what the high and mighty Darcy will think when he finds out he plopped a distant cousin to the Spanish King into his estate in Derbyshire?”

“He may never know, unless José informs their Majesties here in England, which I doubt as grandfather is now deceased. I am simply Lizzy Bennet of Hertfordshire, not Elizabeth Rose Isabella de Cortez Bennet, granddaughter of Count Frederick de Cortez of Luciana.”

“You will *always* be the granddaughter of a count and cousin to a king. You are well within your right to exert a little control now.”

“First I must marry to secure the future of my cousins. *The whole secret lies in confusing the enemy, so that he cannot fathom our real intent.* I will tell my future husband all he needs to know when required. He must come

to like me on my own merits and given the amount of anger he has exhibited thus far; that will take time and patience.”

Elizabeth left her uncle’s study and made her way to the room she shared with Jane, sad that this was the last time she would see her most favorite cousin. She opened the door and was surprised to see her aunt seated on the bed, awaiting her. She patted the mattress and Elizabeth sat down beside her. She instinctively knew her aunt was there to give her the much-dreaded talk.

“Now, Lizzy, I know Mr. Darcy is quite upset over this whole incident, but there will come a time when he will seek your bed because he needs an heir.”

“Aunt Francis, I highly doubt that as Mr. Darcy cannot stand the very sight of me.”

“I believe he likes you far more than he lets on. I have seen his eyes follow you about the room when he thinks no one is watching.”

“He looks at me only to find fault.”

“I have seen your eyes follow him as well.”

“They do not,” she insisted and then looked down at her hands when her aunt quirked an eyebrow at her. “It is hard to miss him, he is so terribly tall.”

“I have been accused of not understanding many things, but knowing what a man thinks when he looks upon a beautiful woman is not one of them. Mr. Darcy is fascinated with you and when the time comes, you can use that fascination to smooth the angry edges of your hasty marriage.”

She then proceeded to spell out, in minute detail, what a new wife could expect in the marriage bed. For a long time after her aunt quit the room, Elizabeth was glad Mr. Darcy had no intention of laying claim to her body and was sending her to Pemberley.

Chapter Seven

The ceremony was short and not sweet. One person dared to voice an argument, but with a quelling look from the master of Pemberley, Mr. Collins had retreated to the back of the chapel, leaving only the Bennet family to witness the charade of a wedding.

Kitty had managed to fix the tear and they had done their very best to smooth out wrinkles and remove stains from around the hem. Her reticule was filled with banknotes and she wore sturdy half boots instead of dancing slippers. But, her lack of wedding finery was the least of her worries. For now, she had to quell the rolling of her stomach and say her vows, although everything in her rebelled.

Mr. Ashbury, a man of God she had known

most of her life, stood before them at the front of Longbourn chapel, the book of Common Prayer laying open in the palms of his hands. He looked at Mr. Darcy.

“Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will.”

Mr. Ashbury turned his attention to Elizabeth.

“Wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded Husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”

No! – her mind screamed, but the words,

“I will” fell from her lips.

Too soon, she heard Mr. Darcy repeat his vows in a hard voice.

“I, Fitzwilliam Arthur George Darcy, take thee Elizabeth Isabella Bennet to my wedded Wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for *poorer*, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth

She took quick notice of how he had stressed the word poorer.

It was now her turn, and she made sure to state and enunciate her full and proper name, wondering if anyone would notice besides her uncle.

I, Elizabeth Rose Isabella de Cortez Bennet, take thee Fitzwilliam Arthur George Darcy, to be my wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for *worse*, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in

health, to love, cherish, and to..." – she swallowed hard – "...obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth."

Mr. Darcy then took her hand in his and said, "With this ring I thee wed: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Without care, he pushed a large, plain gold band onto her finger. They then attended a small table where the marriage certificate awaited their signatures. She cast a longing glance toward the heavy oak doors at the back of the chapel, experiencing one last urge to flee toward freedom. The soft rustle of silk from Jane's gown reminded her forcibly of why she did this. Filled with a fierce love for her adopted family, she set quill to page and for the last time wrote the name, Elizabeth Bennet. As for Mr. Darcy, he scrawled his signature, handed the document to Mr. Bennet, and turned on his heel. "I will wait in

the carriage,” was all he said.

To think that she had met him not more than a dozen times and now she was bound to this taciturn man till death do they part. It happened so fast; she didn't realize until much later he had not fully repeated all of his vows. He had omitted saying *with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow*.

Aunt Fanny and her cousins all hugged her, and Uncle Thomas then escorted her to the carriage. At the door to the conveyance, he took her shoulders and gazed deep into her eyes.

“Be brave, Elizabeth. Know that we love you.”

“We do not have all day,” Mr. Darcy snapped.

With no aid from her husband, not that she expected any, Elizabeth climbed into the carriage where she sat facing Mr. Darcy like a servant.

Better get used to this, Lizzy.

Mr. Darcy rapped on the ceiling and said, “Drive on, Wilkes.” The carriage jolted to a start, throwing Lizzy off the seat. Her husband, who had turned to scowl out the window, was not able to stop her forward motion and she hit her cheek on his knee.

“I had hoped you were finished throwing yourself at me, Madam.”

She scrambled back onto the seat and glared at him, before turning her face to the window and passed the time watching the scenery. They trundled through Meryton and within the half hour were on London Road, heading toward town.

“I thought I was to Pemberley?”

“My plans have changed. We are going to Darcy House in London.”

The sun was just sinking to its rest when they reached the outskirts of London and the streets were dark when they entered Belgrave Square. Mr. Darcy exited the carriage and

waited for her to disembark with the help of a footman. Without a word, they mounted the stairs and the door opened before they had reached the top.

“Good evening, Mr. Darcy,” his butler said in greeting. “Mrs. Whittaker has set up the family dining room for you to enjoy a light repast after you have refreshed yourself.”

“Thank you.” Mr. Darcy took her elbow and brought her forward. “Mrs. Darcy, this is my butler, Mr. Burke.”

The butler did not so much as raise an eyebrow over the insult of Mr. Darcy introducing a servant to his wife and not the other way around. Elizabeth notched it up to her husband’s profound arrogance and lack of regard for her as a gentleman’s daughter.

“I am well pleased to meet you, Mr. Burke.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Burke closed the door and the jangle of keys let Lizzy know the housekeeper had

joined them.

“This is my housekeeper, Mrs. Whittaker.”

Another log of insult added to the woodpile.

“Welcome to Darcy House, Mrs. Darcy.

Would you care to refresh yourself before you dine?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“The footmen should have already unloaded your trunks. Can I have a maid press a fresh dress while you wash up?” It was apparent the housekeeper had noticed the dirty hem of her gown peeking out from beneath the cardinal redingote.

“No thank you, Mrs. Whittaker. My husband was firm in his desire that I wear only this particular dress on my wedding day.”

Mrs. Whittaker’s eyes rounded in tandem with her mouth and she felt Mr. Darcy stiffen by her side. These were his orders, not hers; he would learn to live with the consequences of his temper.

“I see,” the housekeeper said. “Very well, follow me.”

“I will see my wife to her chambers, Mrs. Whittaker. I am going that way myself and would like a private word with her.”

Without saying anything more, he once again took hold of her elbow and steered her up the main staircase and down the hall. All too soon she was being directed into a large bed chamber, filled with heavy ornate furniture that crowded out anything good, or pleasant to look at. She hoped the rest of the house did not contain such vulgar furnishings. She'd go mad if it were. Her lone trunk sat in the middle of the room, a sad testament to how her life would be going forward. Darcy turned on her.

“What did you think to accomplish, embarrassing me in front of my staff?”

“I am not the one who insisted I wear a ruined dress to my wedding. Those were your orders. Not mine!”

“Enough!” He paced away and then back. “This is untenable. You will have to visit a modiste tomorrow and have some things made up.”

“With fifty pounds, exactly what do you think I can purchase? You have a sister who is still growing. You know the cost of a lady’s wardrobe.”

“Your clothes are not fit for a scullery maid. It will not do for Mrs. Darcy to be seen in cotton dresses and made over bonnets.”

She bristled at his derogatory language. Cotton dresses, indeed!

“Mayhap you should have thought about that before you demanded I take nothing more than one trunk. As it was, you were going to send me on to Pemberley without so much of a thought as to warm winter clothing, boots, muffs, and heavy coats. This dress and redingote would not have kept me warm for long. Unless that was your plan. That I freeze to death before I arrived, and you would

become the much-pitied widower.”

“I will admit I acted in a rash manner and will have to make amends. Before we dine, please attend my study.” He gave her a curt bow and left her room via the connecting door, reminding her in a tangible manner that he slept only a few steps away and the door could never be locked from her side – a wife could not refuse her husband’s entry – it could only be locked from his.

She brought out the few belongings her trunk held, placing the brush and comb set aunt and uncle had given her by way of a wedding present on the small table in her dressing room, which housed at least five wardrobes, all empty. Lizzy Izzy was lovingly situated on the small chair in the corner, while her mother’s jasmine perfume and the box which held the pearl necklace were tucked away in the top drawer.

She had refused to wear either when she said her vows, as she did not love Mr. Darcy

and he most assuredly did not love her. Not even five minutes after Mr. Darcy had left, a servant knocked on the door. When she entered the room, her eyes widened in surprise as she scanned the furnishings, making Elizabeth think the room had been decorated in a different manner than it was now. She quickly recovered and said, "I'm to help you dress for dinner."

"Your name is...?"

"Betty, ma'am."

"Thank you, Betty. I must continue to wear this gown for the evening, but shall require your help before bed and also tomorrow morning."

"You've no others to wear?" Betty looked around and spotted the solitary trunk and nothing more.

"I have but three. Mr. Darcy was very strict with what I could or could not bring with me." Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, but she refused to back down

when she had done nothing wrong.

“He must mean for you to purchase new dresses for your trousseau. He’s very generous in that way. Miss Darcy never wants for anything and I’m sure, as his wife, you’ll be treated just as well as his sister.”

“One can hope.”

After she had washed her face and fixed her hair, she asked a footman to direct her to Mr. Darcy’s study. Upon entering the room, she found him seated at his desk, a small leather bag before him, which he pushed forward saying in a gruff voice, “Here. Take this.”

She approached the desk with the inherent knowledge the pouch was filled with money. Daring to entice his fury, she opened the bag, dumping out coins and a wad of banknotes, quickly extracting five ten-pound notes from the pile. She turned to leave and find the dining room when he stopped her.

“Madam, I insist you take all the money I

have provided.”

Slowly she turned and faced him.

“Why?”

“The amount you have will not buy near enough what you require.”

“You knew that when you drafted the settlement, Mr. Darcy. There was no error in what was faithfully transcribed by your own solicitor. This is what I am entitled to, according to the contract. I will not receive another penny from you until” – she glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner of the room – “seven forty p.m., December 3, 1812.”

She pivoted on her heel and made for her bedchamber, asking a footman to have Mrs. Whittaker send a tray to her room. She could not bear to sit across from her husband and try to eat. There was a very good chance her food would make a reappearance before she quit the table.



Darcy stared at the back of his wife as she left in a flurry of wrinkled skirts, then down at the pile of remaining money scattered about the top of his desk. They may as well have been thirty pieces of silver, his soul felt so dark. His betrayal of her trust and his good manners cut deep. How had he let things get so far undone? He was also deeply ashamed of the swollen bruise which had started to form on one side of her face where she'd struck his knee. If he had been acting the gentleman, she would have faced forward for the carriage ride. He had always given up the seat for any other lady who rode with him, yet his wife, his very own wife, he'd forced to the position of a servant.

At the very least, he should have caught her.

He put the coins and banknotes back into the bag and locked it in his strongbox before making his way to the private family parlor to have a solitary meal. All too soon he was

wrapped in his favorite robe, standing at the door between his bedroom and Elizabeth's. Dare he knock on the door and enter? He was dangerously attracted to her and compromise or no, he would love nothing better than to sink into her warm softness... but, he still did not know if she was in league with Wickham and would remain in the dark until Richard made the promised trip to Meryton.

The next three weeks would be interminable.

He turned from the door and threw himself into the chair by the fireplace, staring into the dying flames. Had he misread his wife's intentions during his time in Hertfordshire? He had automatically assumed she set out to capture him with her wit and vivacity, but given the abrupt coldness he experienced when she took his measly fifty pounds, declaring she would not accept another penny from him until exactly one year from the date and time... it gave him pause.

He was unused to her fine eyes flashing fire at him and deeply regretted how their life venture had begun with such discord – mostly by his hand.

His self loathing grew when his wife appeared at the breakfast table the next morning wearing the same dress. He knew full well she was driving her point home. Did she know this very gown haunted his dreams? The first time he'd seen her in the ivory creation with an opaque overlay which rippled and shimmered with every movement of her body, was in the receiving line at Bingley's ball. Keeping to the shadows, he'd been struck dumb by her innate grace and beauty. It was why he sought her out for a dance when he'd sworn not to show any preference and planned to escape to London the next morning before he did something stupid like proposing a courtship.

The second occasion was at their wedding, by his command. Even though the gown had

visible wrinkles and permanent stains on the hem she remained beautiful, which at the time had infuriated him. He wanted her to be humbled, yet she held her head high and stared him in the eye. He also heard her stumble over the word *obey* in her vows. No matter, she had said it, and he'd been strangely pleased.

And now today. After almost two full days of wear, nothing would ever get the creases out. Yet, his wife wore that damnable dress as though she were a queen and it was made from spun silk, not something which should be relegated to the rag bin. By following his orders, his pettiness was out there for all to see. Because of *his* pride, Mrs. Darcy wore a torn, wrinkled, dirty ball gown and would again tomorrow because he had not allowed her to bring trunks filled with her own clothing. It would not do, she had to be made to see reason.

He filled his plate and took his seat.

Normally, the breakfast room cheered him with its décor of cream and hints of soft yellow – his mother’s color scheme – however, his mind was weighed down with all that had happened in one short week. Elizabeth moved past him and he smelled something distinctively malodorous. Of his wife, he knew her body was clean. He was achingly aware she had requested a bath before retiring the night previous. The offense came from the very dress she wore. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the footman wrinkle his nose before smoothing his features back into a picture of stoic calm.

“Good morning, Mr. Darcy,” his wife said cheerfully before taking up a plate. It appeared she was not affected by the smell in any way.

“Mrs. Darcy. I implore you to seek a modiste this very day. You are in dire need of a wardrobe befitting my wife.”

“Jeremy,” Elizabeth called the footman by

name, which surprised him. “Would you be so kind as to afford Mr. Darcy and I some privacy? You may return in ten minutes.”

The footman gave her a polite bow and left the room, closing the door behind him.

“Who do you think you are to dismiss my servants?” he asked without thought.

“Are they not *our* servants?” She dared to arch an eyebrow at him. “After your response when we first arrived, I assumed you did not want our private business to be paraded in front of servants.”

He had to admit she was correct.

“Thank you. I am surprised you would understand the need for discretion,” he acceded with a regal nod. Elizabeth did not roll her eyes, but she did look to the ceiling before responding.

“Regardless of what you think of my family, we never fought or aired our dirty laundry in front of servants.”

“My servants are loyal and do not gossip.

If they did, they know they will be let go without a referral.”

“Even loyal retainers can let slip personal information without meaning to. I am trying to stave off further gossip about our hasty marriage.” She poured some honey into her tea. “You wish me to attend a modiste to bolster my wardrobe. I must decline, as I do not have the funds and am determined to faithfully abide within the parameters of your orders.”

“I am very aware your allotment of fifty pounds, even if doubled by the amount your father will provide, is barely sufficient to cover a fraction of what you shall require. You must allow me to give you the funds required to purchase a proper wardrobe.”

“If you knew the amount to be insufficient, why did you suggest such a sum?”

There was no mistaking the expression of disappointment clearly etched across her face, and he felt increasingly uncomfortable about

the way he had handled this whole affair. He could have easily settled a hundred times as much upon her, and under normal circumstances with a bride of his choosing, he would have given her that and much more. While he had been angry at the time of drawing up the settlement, the sums he proposed were atrocious and he had reveled in the thought of her being offended. But now, when faced with the physical reality of his anger, he felt nothing but shame over his actions.

“I apologize for my temper. It was not well done. I would like to accompany you to a modiste my sister patronizes and have her begin your new wardrobe.”

“You may very well wish to take me shopping, but I have decided I am more in need of a walk in the park.”

“In that dress?” he blurted out, aghast at the thought of anyone of consequence seeing her in such a filthy article of clothing.

She dabbed her full lips with a linen napkin, set it atop her now empty plate, and with a fluidity of movement which always caught him off guard, stood. His humiliation was further stretched when in an automatic, but futile manner, she attempted to smooth out the wrinkles of her skirt.

“Of course not,” she replied. “Mrs. Whittaker informed me my trunks from Longbourn have arrived.”

“Your trunks!”

As he sat gathering his wits which had scattered themselves about the room, she arched that elegant brow at him and he knew – he just knew – she inwardly smirked at him.

“You said I could not *bring* anything with me, Mr. Darcy but did not specify my clothing and personal belongings could not *follow*.” She gave him a polite curtsy. “Good day, sir.”

Once again, he watched the diminutive form of his wife exit through a door. How many times would she leave him speechless?

He thought about her words. Clever. She was clever. And beautiful. Very beautiful. He was more in danger of falling under her spell than he had been at Netherfield.

Chapter Eight

The next morning, feeling much better in one of her favorite morning dresses, Lizzy filled her plate and sat down to break her fast, thankful that this room in its soothing creams and yellow, was not decorated in the same god-awful manner of her bed chamber. The rest of the house had a quiet elegance, the furniture not ostentatious, but graceful and timeless.

She had not even buttered a roll when a pleasant looking gentleman in uniform entered the room unannounced. This must be the colonel mentioned in the marriage articles. At first, he paused, as though surprised by her presence, but he recovered quickly enough.

“Good morning. Mrs. Darcy, I presume. I am Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Richard

Fitzwilliam.” He gave her a smart bow and then filled his own plate before joining her at the table, noticing for the first time her bruise and giving a start.

“Forgive me, Mrs. Darcy. I cannot sit here and enjoy my breakfast without making sure you are well.”

“I am well, thank you, sir.” She heard a noise and darted a quick glance toward the door, wondering if Mr. Darcy would appear today. He had been gone from the house all of yesterday, although she knew he had returned when she heard movement within his bedchamber after she had retired for the night.

“Are you nervous of your husband finding me here?”

“It is his house. I must learn to expect him in some rooms during certain times of the day.”

“Did he give you that bruise?” There was no mistaking the protective tone to his voice.

Instinctively, her hand flew to her cheek.
“Not directly. After our wedding, I fell forward when the carriage started and hit his knee.”

“He did nothing to break your fall?”

“He did break my fall. With his knee.”

“You well know what I meant. I never thought he would be so callous to a lady”

“He did say he had hoped I had stopped throwing myself at him.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam cursed under his breath. “Even if you did compromise him, he should still behave as a gentleman.”

“I did not compromise him, sir.”

“He begs to differ. Many have tried, but it appears you were the only successful one.”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam, you do not know my character, but I can assure you I did not willingly compromise your cousin. Mr. Darcy is the last man on earth I would ever have prevailed upon to marry.”

She felt a mild bemusement at his obvious surprise.

“Does he know this?”

“Would that require him to engage in a civil conversation with me?” The colonel grimaced and then gave an elegant shrug of his shoulder. “You know your cousin well. Since *that* night, he has been in high dudgeon, making outrageous demands only for the sheer satisfaction of ensuring that I am as uncomfortable and as unhappy as he is. Sadly, prior to the incident, he had been quite solicitous. Indeed, the night of the incident, when we were outside on the terrace, he worried I had become chilled. Then he said the name Wickham, and his whole demeanor changed.”

“Do you know why he said that?”

“No,” she replied with a shake of her head. “You are acquainted with Mr. Wickham?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” The colonel practically growled out his answer.

“Are you aware Mr. Wickham claims your

cousin cheated him out of his inheritance?”

“Is he still spreading that old manure?”

“Manure! I may not have believed everything told to me, but I would hazard a guess there were elements of truth to his story.”

“You may be the first person I know who did not fall completely for Wickham’s sad tale of woe.” Colonel Fitzwilliam fixed his gaze on her. “George Wickham was gifted one thousand pounds outright by my Uncle Darcy. Wickham then told my still grieving cousin he did not want to take orders and so, in lieu of the living, accepted three thousand pounds. I was witness to his barely legible scrawl on the legal documents and was surprised there were not drool marks from him salivating over the amount of money he would soon have in his pockets.”

“Four thousand pounds. Such a sum! I did not know.”

“And why would you? Darcy does not

spread gossip, unlike Wickham. Did you also know he had the audacity to demand the living when it became vacant?" At the mute shake of her head, he continued. "Knowing that his old childhood friend is a prolific womanizer, Darcy could not in good conscience have him become a rector, so he denied him."

"I would hope so," Elizabeth said.

"Now you know why my cousin has nothing good to say about George Wickham."

"I do, but what has me confused is why he keeps insisting I was somehow involved with Mr. Wickham that night at Mr. Bingley's ball. He was not even in attendance."

"You know this for a fact."

"I do. My youngest sister desperately despaired that dear Mr. Wickham was not there to dance with her."

"My cousin is known for his implacable temper, but once he knows you have no involvement with Wickham, I am sure he will

be quite solicitous to your needs and ensure your married life is a happy one.”

“Should he not be solicitous from the advent?” She raised her hand to stop him from replying. “Believe in our future marital felicity if you must, Colonel. I know for a fact that his good opinion once lost is lost forever. I expect to live in a cold marriage, made colder by the fact I have to subsist on a paltry sum of money to take care of my needs. Fifty pounds does not go far in this economic climate.”

She had no intention of telling her husband’s cousin that she did not need Darcy’s funds. The colonel seemed sympathetic to her cause, but he was family to Mr. Darcy, not her.

“Fifty pounds a month is extremely generous.”

“No, Colonel. Fifty pounds per annum.”

His mouth dropped open, then shut with an audible clack of his teeth.

“I suppose I could always purchase one vital item per year,” she prattled, doing her

best imitation of Lydia. "I would have to choose between a sturdy pair of boots or perhaps a warmer coat. But then, I also have to buy fabric to make dresses along with delicate things we women require, such as chemises and nightwear."

The colonel turned dark red. With rage or shame, she wasn't sure. Nothing made a man more uncomfortable than a woman discussing delicates.

"I will bloody well kill him."

"Then, I thank you now in advance. For if you are successful, I shall be a widow who has lost nothing and can return home one thousand pounds richer with a promise of two hundred pounds per annum. These are the amounts agreed upon in the advent of his death before mine."

"I do not understand. Why would your father sign such an insulting settlement?"

"Your cousin said he would not marry me otherwise. I had no choice. I have four

remaining sisters who would have been ruined alongside me.”

“Darcy is a fool.”

“I will not argue that point.”

“So, what will we do with you for now?”

He gave her a thoughtful glance. “I could introduce you to my mother.”

“I do not think my husband is prepared for me to meet any more members of his family, although I have learned that *in the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity*, which makes the idea quite tempting.”

The colonel rocked back in his seat, looking at her with open admiration. “Mrs. Darcy, have you by chance read the *Art of War*?”

She faced him, sporting an impish grin. “Not only have I read the book, Colonel, but studied it extensively.”

“Your father let you read this book?”

“It was my father’s most treasured possession, full of his own thoughts and

notations.”

“Was? I thought Mr. Bennet was still alive.”

She mentally kicked herself for dropping even the tiniest morsel about her private personal life. She decided to not embellish and give as few details as possible. *Ponder and deliberate before you make a move*, and at this stage of the game, she did not want any of Mr. Darcy’s family to know her true status. Once she knew the lay of the land, she might loosen the ropes of information.

“Mr. Thomas Bennet is my father’s elder brother.”

“I am of the mind you are preparing for battle.”

“I do not know what Mr. Darcy has told you about me, I am sure it was not favorable. I had not intended to leave Longbourn until I reached my majority. This marriage changed my plans considerably, and not for the better, I might add. I am adjusting and moving

forward.”

“Darcy has no idea what is in store for him.”

“No, he does not.”

“Mrs. Darcy, you are an absolute delight! If he were not so angry, I know Darcy would have fallen in love with you, if only for your quick wit and devious mind.”

“I am afraid he may never know that side of me. He has chosen a different path.”

“For the moment, yes, but his path could still loop around and join yours further down. As for today, pray let me introduce you to my mother.”

“I cannot, Colonel. I do not wish to give further rise to my husband’s anger and provide a reason for an annulment. I do not have his permission to meet members of his family.”

“And yet, here you are with a member of the family.”

“True, but you did not expect to see me here today, that much was very clear when

you first arrived. I suspect you thought we were on our way to Derbyshire. Carry on with whatever you had planned. I have much to do before I face my husband again.”

“You are correct in that I did not expect to see you here. Darcy told me you were off to Pemberley and I popped in to break my fast with Georgiana. I am quite glad he changed his mind. Do you know when he will return?”

“Once again, Colonel, that would require conversation. My husband has become a wraith in his own home and I have no idea, at all, of where he might have gone or what his habits are. You have a much better chance of guessing his intentions than I.”

“True,” he cast a quick glance toward the door. “Were you given any idea as to when my cousin Georgiana will come down to eat?”

“As far as I know, Miss Darcy is not in residence. More than likely Mr. Darcy removed his innocent sister from his house so that she is not tainted by associating with me.”

Although surprised the colonel was not aware of the whereabouts of his cousins, Elizabeth did not ask further questions. That could lead to the very alert colonel asking his own and she was not ready to dodge any further intrusions into her private life.

They finished eating and the colonel took his leave. Lizzy went upstairs to grab the letter she'd written the night previous, then slipped outside and hailed a hansom cab, paying the driver to take it to her uncle's house on Gracechurch Street. She promised the driver another guinea on the completion of his task to ensure he did her bidding. She then waited on tenterhooks by the upstairs window for his return. A little over an hour later, she spied him and once again slipped out of the house.

As she paid him the remainder of his fee, he handed her a note from her aunt.

"Thank you, kind sir, for returning so quickly."

"You 'ave a right good day there, Miss."

He tipped his hat and continued down the road.

She hurried into the house and went straight to her room to read the sealed reply from her aunt.

*Mrs. Darcy,
Thank you for your inquiry into
my husband's business. Gardiner
Emporium has the best materials
for any undertaking you are
considering. I would be pleased to
meet you at the place and time
suggested.*

*Yours,
Mrs. Edward Gardiner*

She knew Aunt Madeline had couched the letter in such a manner on the off-chance Mr. Darcy discovered what she had done and demanded to read the note. She then rang the bell and asked the maid to have Mrs. Whittaker attend her in the main drawing

room. It was time to begin her duties as Mrs. Darcy and take a tour of the house.

~ ~ ~

Darcy shook out the paper he had been trying to read for the past half hour in a feeble attempt to pass time after fleeing his house that morning. A quick check of the society pages revealed nothing had appeared in print – yet – about his ill-timed wedding. Although an announcement must be posted sometime in the near future. He had just started reading about the unrest in the north when Bingley arrived. He felt a measure of happiness at the sight of his friend alongside a measure of dread over telling him about marrying Elizabeth.

He had planned on giving his friend the news, just not at this juncture. His embarrassment over Georgiana's righteous anger was still fresh. Also, he did not want to give Bingley reason to return to Hertfordshire

and continue his pursuit of Miss Jane Bennet. Darcy may be shackled to a fortune hunter, but his good friend did not need to be saddled with one as well. To that end, he decided to say nothing.

“Darcy, I say, this is a pleasant surprise. I was under the impression you and Miss Darcy might have repaired to Pemberley for Christmas.”

“No, Georgiana has asked if she could stay with my aunt and uncle for the next little while.”

“Still angry with you, eh?”

“She will get over it.”

“I do not know about that, Darcy. My sister holds a grudge like it is her best friend. She brings it along with her to every function and family meal.”

“That is your sister, Bingley. Georgiana does not have a rancorous bone in her body.”

“True, but I must say, I was quite impressed with the way she stood up to all of

us the last time we attended Darcy House.”

“I should apologize in her stead. It was ill done on her part.”

“Oh no! I should apologize for my sister, bringing up all that dreadful business in the first place. I see nothing wrong with how your sister reacted. It reminded me of how charming she truly is, to defend a person she had never met.”

“Thank you, Bingley.”

“I say, what are you doing this evening? Would you care to join us for dinner so that you do not have to rattle about that big house all by yourself?”

Thoughts of Elizabeth eating alone jumped into his consciousness. They had only been married two days. Just as quickly, he shrugged off the image. She would have to learn how their marriage was going to proceed. He would not curtail his activities because of their marriage and would do as he saw fit.

“I will join you, Bingley.”

“Capital.” Bingley stood. “We shall see you around seven then?”

“Yes.”

~ ~ ~

The carriage arrived at Darcy House and he stepped out, unconsciously squaring his shoulders before mounting the stairs. Upon entry, he asked Burke where he might find his wife and was told she was with Mrs. Whittaker. He handed off his outerwear and began his search, coming across them in the music room. Upon spying him, Mrs. Whittaker curtsied and Elizabeth stood, hands clasped in front of her. He dismissed his housekeeper and turned to address his wife.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Darcy.”

“Mr. Darcy,” she replied with a nod of her head.

“Have you canvassed much of the house?”

“Only the first floor and we have now proceeded to the second floor and family

wing.”

“What do you think of the music room?”

Elizabeth glanced about the room.

“Very bright and I see you have a fine instrument, but knowing that your sister is a proficient pianist, I am not surprised.”

“Yes, Georgiana spends much time in this room.”

“I look forward to meeting your sister. Is she in Derbyshire?”

Darcy shifted on his feet, uncomfortable where the conversation could lead.

“No, she is in town, staying with my uncle the earl, for the time being.”

He was surprised by the cold look his wife bestowed on him.

“Keeping your sister away from the vulgar, poverty-stricken filth you married?”

“I do not view you like that.”

“Do you not? Your behavior in Meryton clearly showed you held a low opinion of my family and everyone knows that you found me

barely tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt you.”

His uncle was proved correct. She’d heard what he said at the Assembly.

“I was wrong to say that to Bingley.”

“And yet, you did, Mr. Darcy. Your opinions were set that first night and you executed your belief to its fullest with that sham of a document you forced Mr. Bennet to sign.”

His chest burned with anger and he sought to change the subject. “Shall we continue the tour you started?”

He dared not offer his arm, but with a wave of his hand, indicated they should proceed toward the family parlor. Once they had finished touring the various drawing rooms and he had shown her a little office his mother had used for her own correspondence, he then led the way to the family wing and various bedchambers.

“This is Georgiana’s room. I will not open

the door as this is her private sanctum.”

“Might I ask when I will meet my new sister?”

“She will stay with my uncle while you and I adjust to our married life.”

He thought he heard her murmur – *that long?* – and chose to continue the tour.

“These are my rooms.” He did not open the door, unwilling for his wife to see *his* private sanctuary. “And, as you well know, these are your rooms.”

He noted how she wrinkled her nose when he mentioned her rooms, but just as quick her features returned to one of calm.

“You do not like your rooms?”

“The *rooms* are delightful.”

“But...?”

“The furniture is far too large for the space.”

“Beggars cannot be choosy over where they lay their head, Madam. Either live with what you have, or you can choose to sleep in

one of the servant's quarters. I will not advance one farthing to the decoration of your chambers."

"I will never ask you for money, you may stake your life upon that promise." She turned a bit to her left and looked toward the staircase. "Are we finished, Mr. Darcy? I had plans to speak with Mrs. Whittaker about the menu for tomorrow."

"You are undermining my housekeeper's decisions?"

"Undermining?" That impertinent brow rose again. "Am I not mistress of this house?"

"No. Yes, but – " He wasn't ready for her to become the mistress of his house. He wasn't prepared for her to be in his life in any way other than his dreams.

"I see. I am Mrs. Darcy in name only." Her tone had hardened, as had her eyes. They glittered like a pair of faceted emeralds. "Very well. You could not have shown me, with more clarity, of where I stand in your

estimation. Thank you, Mr. Darcy.” She pivoted and strode down the hall without looking back.

He cursed beneath his breath as, once again, he stared after his wife’s retreating back. While he dressed for dinner, he asked Jenkins to tell the cook that he would be dining out and she needed only to prepare a meal for his wife. A slight thinning of his valet’s mouth was the only indication of his displeasure. Wisely, he said nothing.

Chapter Nine

Over the next few weeks, Elizabeth met with Aunt Madeline to purchase furniture for her personal chambers. She figured Mr. Darcy would never willingly enter them, therefore, he would never see the changes made. All deliveries were funneled through her uncle, which kept the shopkeepers and craftsmen in the dark over who the purchases were for. Uncle Edward also had his own men set up her furniture, bypassing the use of Mr. Darcy's footmen. The only people who had any true knowledge of her activity were Burke, Mrs. Whittaker, and of course, Betty.

There was no worry of Mr. Darcy stumbling across her uncle's men as he was hardly ever in residence. What he did with his time, she had no idea. He also was

conspicuously absent at night and from that quarter, she absolutely had no desire of discovering where and with whom he spent time. She only knew that if he tried to start marital relations, she would only proceed if he was thoroughly examined by her own personal physician. She had no desire to contract some dread disease because her husband could not control his base desires.

All in all, she was delighted with her rooms which no longer made her feel as though she could barely move, let alone breathe. Against the far wall, she placed an elegant four poster bed with roses carved on the headboard and posts. Beneath the window, overlooking the back garden, she placed a simple escritoire. She'd had her uncle's men remove the heavy armoires and replaced them with four smaller ones as well as a dressing table. All of her furnishings, made from beautiful mahogany wood, had matching roses carved on the legs and cornices. To complete

her ensemble, she commissioned two comfortable wingback chairs covered in a rich rose damask, which bracketed the fireplace. A perfect spot to curl up and read a book at the end of the day. Beside her fireplace, she'd had her uncle hire a craftsman carpenter to build clever bookshelves, which she would fill as soon as she attended her favorite store, Hatchard's.

Today, her assignment was to commission new linens and after successfully choosing new fabric to replace her curtains, counterpane, and bedclothes, Elizabeth sat across from Aunt Madeline to enjoy a much welcome break at their favorite tea shop just off Bond Street.

They had just received their tea and confections when the door to the shop opened and an elegant lady, along with a handsome young girl entered and were seated on the opposite side of the room, partially hidden by a column. Elizabeth hadn't paid them much

mind other than to experience a sense of familiarity with the girl. Because she didn't want to be caught staring, she turned back to her conversation with Aunt Madeline.

"I am delighted with what we purchased and will meet you next week at the seamstress I have always used for linens." She took a sip of her tea before continuing. "Has Uncle Edward reached out to find another family to lease Netherfield? I am quite sure the Bingleys shall not return and hate the thought of it lying vacant for yet another year."

"No, he has heard nothing from the gentleman. Such a shame, how everything came about. How have you been faring with *your* gentleman? Jane wrote that he is a very handsome man."

"He is more than handsome, aunt, which is why his ill temper and bad behavior is so jarring. The first time I laid eyes on him I will admit my heart fluttered and I worried I might behave as silly as Lydia."

“That is not like you.”

“No, it is not.”

“What changed your mind about him?”

“He spoke.”

Aunt Madeline’s bottom lip dropped ever so slightly and then she laughed, covering her mouth with her fingers although her eyes sparkled with merriment. “Dear Lizzy, I truly can understand your disenchantment. Other than disappointed hopes, you are coping?”

“I am well, although I was left in no doubt the other day that I have no authority within the walls of his home. I find my days are tedious. I do not know what I shall do once the renovations of my bedchambers are completed.”

“You have not met any of his family?”

“Other than his cousin, whom I told you of earlier, I have met no one else. I am sure, once the weather permits, he will haul me off to Derbyshire and leave me there until he feels the need to beget an heir.”

“He has not come to your bed?”

“No, he has not and at this point I am grateful. The thought of being intimate with him is beyond my capabilities at the moment. I will take as long a reprieve as I can.” She flicked another quick glance at the girl and again wondered why she seemed so familiar. “I must admit,” she finally said, “I do not mind that he is absent from the house, although I am not used to the quiet solitude. Longbourn was always filled with conversation and laughter.”

“What will you do when he finds out you have refurbished the mistress’ chambers?”

“Truly aunt, he barely darkens the door of his own home. I have no fear of him peeking into my bedchambers, and even if he did, I have used my own funds.”

“When, and I say when because sooner or later he will discover what you have done, he will wonder how you paid for all the furnishings and *accoutrements*. He is not a

stupid man, Lizzy. When he receives no outstanding bills, he will ask you where the money came from.”

“Maybe in some way that is why I am doing this. I wish to inform him, on my own terms, that I do not need him or his money. I am still very angry over his behavior. I told him I would never ask him for money.”

The door to the shop jangled again.

“Marriage is for life, Lizzy. Please try to reconcile before it is too late – ”

“What are *you* doing in here!”

A haughty voice sliced through their conversation. Elizabeth and Aunt Madeline looked up to find Miss Bingley standing next to their table, her face flushed in anger.

“As you can see, I am enjoying a cup of Oolong tea.” Elizabeth held Miss Bingley’s gaze with unflinching resolve. To drive the point home, she raised her cup and took a sip before placing it back on the saucer.

“I demand the proprietor throw this

wanton hussy from the premises.” Miss Bingley cried out in a loud voice, looking toward the rear of the shop. An older gentleman came through a curtained entrance and approached them.

“I would ask that you lower your voice, Madam. You are disturbing my other guests.” He cast a furtive glance toward the woman behind the column, hinting at her importance.

“Do you always serve courtesans in this establishment?”

Aunt Madeline’s mouth dropped open in surprise while Elizabeth sat stunned. The proprietor turned to face Elizabeth; his face showing disgust.

“I must ask that you leave at once and never enter these premises again.”

Elizabeth stayed seated, refusing to even look at Miss Bingley.

“I am not what she has intimated and frankly, very disturbed that you would take the word of a virtual stranger without first

finding out the truth of the matter.”

She could tell the man was surprised at how well she spoke and he looked toward Miss Bingley, who responded with, “I know for a fact that Mr. Darcy, nephew to the Earl of Matlock and a *particular* friend of mine, refused to marry this chit after she tried to compromise him.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes in embarrassment. Miss Bingley was not lowering her voice and now everyone in the shop could hear the venom she spewed. Thankfully, besides the other two customers, only the owner and his employee heard her tirade.

“I shall ask you one more time to exit my shop and not return.”

The owner had obviously decided Miss Bingley held more sway. Unbeknownst to them, the lady had come to stand beside Elizabeth’s table. Caroline audibly sucked in a breath at the arrival of the elegant woman, to whom the owner gave a deferential nod and

began to apologize profusely.

“I apologize, my lady. If you return to your table, I will have Agatha bring out an assortment of sweets to make up for all this unpleasantness.”

“I am not wanting more biscuits, kind sir. I have come here to ask this person” – she indicated Miss Bingley – “why she accosted my niece in such a dreadful manner.”

Miss Bingley glanced toward the young girl, still seated.

“My lady, in no way did I infer *your* niece was deficient. I am speaking of this trollop, Eliza Bennet, whom I know for a fact is a fallen woman.”

“Miss Bingley – it is Miss Bingley, correct?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Pray, stay silent on this matter as you are in grave danger of making a fool of yourself, more than you have done already.”

“Excuse me?”

The older woman turned her attention to Elizabeth.

“Forgive me for not seeing you when I entered the shop, dearest Elizabeth. I must have been so entranced with what your sister Georgiana was saying about her new music master, I did not even look around when we came in.”

Two things shot through Elizabeth’s mind like a bolt of lightning, illuminating the scene with perfect clarity. One, the lady in front of her had to be Lady Matlock and two, the girl with her was none other than Miss Georgiana Darcy. She now realized why the young girl seemed familiar. She had seen a portrait of her during her tour with Mrs. Whittaker. A third thought began to germinate and that was Darcy’s aunt was aware she and her nephew were married, most likely via her son, the colonel. She rose to her feet and decided to let Lady Matlock carry the conversation.

“Thank you, my lady. I was so vested in

my conversation with Mrs. Gardiner, I also did not notice your entry.”

Not for the life of her would she divulge Mrs. Gardiner was her cousin’s aunt in front of Caroline Bingley. Through all this, Miss Bingley’s color rose and her mouth had thinned to the point of almost disappearing. Mrs. Hurst began to edge toward the exit.

“Mr. Darcy married *you*?”

“Yes, Miss Bingley.”

“When!”

“Am I to understand my husband did not inform you of his joining the name Bennet to Darcy?” Elizabeth could not help but dig at her nemesis with a turn of her own phrase. “Such a shame. And here I thought you were all such great friends.”

Before Caroline could speak, Lady Matlock deliberately stared her down and her mouth clamped shut.

“Elizabeth, would you introduce me to your companion?”

“I would be honored. Mrs. Edward Gardiner, I present to you, Lady Matlock.”

“Is that of Gardiner Emporium?”

Aunt Madeline had also risen to her feet and deliberately stood in front of Miss Bingley, effectively making her stare at her back. Elizabeth struggled not to smile.

“It is, my lady,” Aunt Maddy said with a polite curtsy.

“I have been to your husband’s warehouse. He has the most delightful products.”

“We are both very proud of his business, my lady.”

“And for good reason.” Lady Matlock turned to the owner of the shop, who stood mouth agape. “Would you please add two more chairs to my table? *Mrs.* Darcy and her companion will join myself and Miss Darcy.”

It was at this time the countess gave Caroline her undivided attention, and even though she leaned into the younger woman and spoke low, Elizabeth clearly heard every

word.

“Heed my words, Miss Bingley. Never, ever, denigrate a member of my family. Do not even whisper the vitriol you feel splashing about your tongue. Swallow it and move back into the shadows where you so rightly belong. Do I make myself clear?”

All color had leached from Miss Bingley’s face during this exchange. She audibly swallowed and gave a slight nod. Lady Matlock pivoted on her heel and without even acknowledging Miss Bingley or her sister further, returned to her table. After a quick glance at Aunt Madeline, Elizabeth followed and they took their seats. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst stood completely motionless, staring at one another before they exited the shop. The four ladies sat without saying a word until fresh tea had been provided and a vast array of treats were piled on the table.

“Lady Matlock,” Elizabeth decided to break the awkward silence. “This was not how

I envisioned meeting my husband's family, nor his sister. I am so sorry it happened this way."

"You are not responsible for that vile woman's outlandish behavior."

"Regardless, it was less than ideal."

"Everything about this, Mrs. Darcy, has been less than ideal. I am of a mind that given your candor in front of Mrs. Gardiner that she is aware of most things."

"She is Lady Matlock."

"Then, she will not be surprised if I introduce you to your sister?"

Elizabeth dared smile. "No, she will not."

"Mrs. Darcy, may I introduce you to Miss Georgiana Darcy."

"Good afternoon, Miss Darcy. I am well pleased to meet you, even under such trying circumstances. I have heard nothing but good things about you from everyone."

"Thank you, Mrs. Darcy."

Elizabeth could barely hear her; the voice was so soft.

“Miss Darcy, I would also like to introduce you to Mrs. Edward Gardiner. Mrs. Gardiner is aunt to my cousins and also my closest friend, next to my cousin Jane Bennet.”

Elizabeth took stock of her new family members. While Lady Matlock, seemingly at ease with Aunt Madeline, dominated the conversation, Lizzy carefully watched Miss Darcy. She recalled the one time she had a conversation with Mr. Wickham, his derision of the young lady. He had hinted quite strongly that she was proud and aloof but from what she could tell the poor girl was terrifyingly shy.

“Miss Darcy, I heard from quite reliable sources, that you enjoy playing the pianoforte.”

Life sparked in Georgiana’s eyes. Bless Miss Bingley. At last, she was good for something.

“I do. It is somewhat of a passion of mine.”

“How delightful. As much as I love music, I am not terribly proficient.”

“But William wrote more than once how much he enjoyed both your playing and singing.”

Lizzy drew back in surprise. “He did?”

“Oh, yes! If you knew my brother, he was almost profuse in his praise. He has never done that before.”

Miss Darcy’s eyes widened as though she realized she’d shared something she should not have. Lizzy laid a hand over hers.

“Fear not, Miss Darcy. I will not tell him that you spoke of this. I am sure you are aware of the hasty manner in which we came to be married and I would never have you feel uncomfortable in my presence.”

Through all this, Lady Matlock had watched, as did Aunt Madeline.

“Mrs. Darcy...” Lady Matlock paused, “May I call you Elizabeth?”

Startled, she nodded while saying, “I

would be honored.”

“Then you must call me Aunt Lucinda.”

“My lady – ” she stopped at the teasing frown Lady Matlock bestowed on her, “Pray, excuse me... Aunt Lucinda. You barely know me. I do not want you to offer something you may have to retract.”

“I have navigated the shark infested waters of the *ton* for many years. At times, it is exhausting. The one skill I have honed like a fine blade is the ability to see who has true class and manners. You, my dear, have them in spades. I will be more than happy to sponsor you and introduce you to other ladies who hold my esteem.”

“Thank you.” She glanced toward Aunt Madeline for support, who gave her a smile and a small nod of the head. “I do not wish to go against my husband’s express wishes and ask that you relay your interest through him.”

“Stubborn. He can be quite stubborn,” Lady Matlock muttered with a quick look at

Georgiana. “Well, my dear, I am tired of waiting for William to initiate our official first meeting. Shall we invite your new sister for tea?”

“Yes, Aunt Lucinda. I would like that very much.”

“Consider it done.” Lady Matlock assessed Elizabeth carefully and her gaze kept straying to her cheek. “Before we depart, may I ask how you came about with a contusion on your face?”

Involuntarily, Elizabeth’s hand flew to cover the bruise which had faded to a soft yellow. Miss Darcy, who had not noticed the discoloration until it was pointed out by her aunt, gasped.

“As Mr. Darcy and I departed Longbourn after our wedding, I fell forward when the carriage started and hit my cheek.”

“How was it possible for you to fall forward when the carriage started?”

Lizzy found herself looking to Aunt

Madeline for direction, who gave a slight nod, knowing the truth of the matter as it had been the first thing she'd asked when they'd initially met.

“I was seated backward, my lady.”

“Backward! Your husband made you sit backward like a servant?” She could only nod. Lady Matlock stood, clearly indicating their time together had come to an end. “My nephew has much to explain. I will send a note with a date and time for a day next week. The bruise should have fully abated by then – in case we are joined by others,” she explained when Elizabeth’s cheeks flamed with embarrassment. “No need to heap more nonsense on the garbage pile of gossip.”

She moved around the table, drawing on her gloves with Miss Darcy close to her side. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Gardiner. I look forward to your continued company and will tell my friends of your husband’s warehouse. Elizabeth” – she took one of Lizzy’s hands in

hers – “I cannot tell you how delighted I am to have finally met you.”

She released Lizzy’s hand and both ladies exited the shop with Miss Darcy casting a longing glance at them. Elizabeth looked at Aunt Madeline, who was smiling widely now.

“I can scarce believe that happened.”

“Believe it, Lizzy. I must be getting home or the children’s nanny will think I have abandoned them.”

“Shall we meet at the seamstress after my tea with Lady Matlock?”

“You forget dear, we are off to Longbourn for Christmas.”

“I had forgotten. She blinked back tears and forced a large smile to grace her face.

“Give everyone my love and Jane an extra big hug from me.”

“I will.” Aunt Maddie kissed her on the cheek before saying her farewells.

Elizabeth soon found herself back at Darcy House and hurried to her rooms. Once safely

within the privacy of her bed chamber, she brought out the letter from Jane that her aunt had given her earlier in the day.

Longbourn, Hertfordshire
Dearest Lizzy,

I was so happy to have received your letter. As I had not thought to hear from you so soon, my heart and mind were eased with the news that you made it safely to London and are not so far away. I worried about you going to Derbyshire alone.

Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas have set the date of January 10th for their wedding. She says to thank you for all the effort you expended in helping find her happiness and I know she would be most gratified if your husband allowed you to attend the ceremony. Mama remains perturbed that the heir to Longbourn did not find a bride from within the walls of Longbourn, but finds solace in the fact she has one daughter well married.

Lydia and Kitty remain enamored with the officers of the ___shire Militia. If you

remember Mr. Wickham, he has become a regular visitor to Longbourn, along with Captain Carter and Mr. Pratt. I cannot tell at this time whom the girls favor more, Mr. Wickham or Captain Carter. Poor Mr. Pratt is sometimes grievously ignored. Mr. Wickham tends to ask after you a fair bit. I believe though he is more interested in your husband than in yourself and is quite frustrated with the lack of news in that area. Papa has promised dire consequences if we dare gossip about your misfortune.

Aunt and Uncle arrive on the 23rd for Christmas and once again, Longbourn will ring with the excited chatter of children. As expected, I shall return with them after the holidays. I truly hope we can find a way to meet. I need to see your smiling face not only in my dreams.

Mary bids me to give you a warm greeting. She has been very prodigious in her practice of Christmas hymns and is looking forward to when we all gather around on the eve of Christ's birth and sing songs of joy. How I wish you could be here. Longbourn is not the same

without you.

I shall sign off, sister of my heart. Lydia has stolen another of Kitty's ribbons and I must go be the peacemaker. Of this behavior, I am sure you do not miss.

*Always with love,
Jane*

She did miss their behaviors. All of them, good or bad. She folded up the letter and placed it in the top drawer of the desk and breathed deeply, trying valiantly to not cry openly at the thought of her family all gathered for Christmas, failing miserably. Tears flowed unrestrained down her cheeks. All too soon, the agitation and tears brought on a headache, which grew steadily worse. So much so, she asked Betty to bring her a tray for dinner, not willing to take the chance her husband might have returned to dine at home, rather than his club – if that was where he fed his physical needs, let alone his carnal ones.

She needed her emotional armor to be in pristine condition when she faced him again.



Days melded into weeks and Darcy kept to his study, coming out occasionally to eat a silent meal with his wife, followed by a quiet evening with them both reading, or her playing the pianoforte or sewing. More often than not, he removed himself to his gentleman's club and rare was the day he joined her for breakfast. He knew he had behaved abominably and until he could right the wrongs of the marriage settlement, he could not look his wife in the face or bear to be in her company.

And so it was, one week before Richard's trip to Meryton, Darcy made an appointment with his solicitors. He sat across from Mr. Kemper, one of the senior partners from the firm of Kemper and Bedway, solicitors to the Darcy family for the past twenty-five years.

Mr. Kemper looked up from the aged parchment in his hands and said, "Let me clarify. You would like to prepare a new marriage settlement, using your fathers as a guide?"

"That is correct."

"Mm hmmm... and I am to remove the clause which specifies upon your death your wife must vacate any and all residences owned by you, taking with her only that which she brought into the marriage and will receive a thousand pounds upon your death and an allowance of two hundred pounds per annum."

"I also wish to increase the death benefit to twenty thousand pounds and her allowance to three thousand pounds per annum."

"The article your father had for the heir and other children, shall that be added to yours verbatim?"

"Yes, my father's template is a sound one and I should have used this from the very

beginning.”

“Frankly, Mr. Darcy, I was surprised when you did not. Even your previous mistress received better legal reimbursement when you terminated the arrangement last year.” Darcy’s cheeks burned with embarrassment at the reminder of his broken liaison. Not only had Georgiana almost eloped with Wickham, but Celeste had taken a lover behind his back. Another nasty discovery he had made when he dropped by unexpectedly to tell her he was off to Ramsgate for a few days and would not be seeking her company at his scheduled appointment on Wednesday. At the time of setting up their arrangement, a night in her boudoir was by far more palatable than a night at Almack’s amidst dewy eyed debutantes and their desperate mothers.

Mr. Kemper’s gaze moved down the document. “As for your wife’s pin money, am I to assume we are going to increase that as well?”

“Yes,” he said gruffly. “Exactly what my father had for my mother.”

“Splendid. I believe that takes care of everything, except...” Mr. Kemper paused. “Shall we still include the clause your wife’s father created?”

“Absolutely. He was adamant in having it added, and I see no reason for not allowing it to stand as is.”

“We shall have this prepared next week, sir.”

Both men stood and Darcy gave Mr. Kemper a polite nod of the head and hurried to his carriage. Glad that nasty business was out of the way, he told his driver to take him back to Darcy House. As the carriage trundled through the busy streets, he worried the pinkie ring on his finger.

He had not pressed Elizabeth into performing her wifely duties for two reasons. One, he still did not know if she and Wickham were involved intimately and would remain in

the dark on that score until Richard returned from Meryton later in the week. The second reason, he was fairly certain now his wife actively hated him, further fueled by his arrogant behavior. If she were innocent of all wrongdoing, he had a very long road to forgiveness ahead of him.

He well knew she had a caring personality, much in evidence when she attended Netherfield Park to look after her sick sister. How many women did he know that would walk three miles, through fields and mud, all in the name of sisterly love? One. He knew only one and had married her.

Chapter Ten

Richard cantered through the picturesque village of Meryton and paused for one brief moment when he beheld the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, walking with three other girls, one of whom gave him a flirtatious little wave. He wished he could find a valid reason to stop and be introduced. All too soon, he passed them by and continued on to the encampment. In short order he stood before Colonel Benjamin Forster, whom he knew quite well, and had appraised him of Wickham's perfidy, providing all the receipts Darcy had purchased over the years. In total, they added up to over one thousand pounds. The colonel ordered Wickham to report to his office and Richard took a seat in the adjoining room.

His smile was feral when he heard raised voices and the sound of furniture being overturned. Wickham was not giving up without a fight. No small wonder. If he didn't rot in Marshalsea, he would be deported and he was not one to forfeit his pleasures. Soon, it was all quiet and Colonel Forster called him back into the room.

“Mr. Wickham will be stripped of his rank and ready for transport tomorrow morning. I have called in the local magistrate and once he has signed the required documents, I wash my hands of the man.”

“Do you mind if I chat with Wickham? I have something which needs to be cleared up, and I will admit, it is of a personal nature. Nothing to do with all of this in any way.”

“You can go to his cell and talk about anything you like.”

“Thank you, Benjamin. It was good to see you again.”

“We will need your signature on the

documents as well before the magistrate leaves.”

“Not a problem. I shall return within the hour.”

Richard left the office and asked for directions to the temporary brig set up near the colonel’s quarters. He could not help but smile when he was led to where Wickham was chained to a wall, his face swollen from a well-placed punch.

“I never thought I would see the day when you were as ugly on the outside as you are on the inside.”

“Fitzwilliam. I would ask what you were doing here, but then we both know Darcy usually sends a lap dog to do his dirty work.”

“You had it good, Wickham.” He refused to rise to the bait. “You had four thousand pounds in your pocket. You could have gone anywhere, been anything you wanted, but you chose to be a gambler and degenerate womanizer. You have no one to blame but

yourself.”

“Quit your sermonizing. What I do with my life is none of your business.”

“True, but I would like to know more about your latest adventure.”

“What adventure?”

“The one you cooked up with a gullible girl here in Meryton. I must admit, it was a good one. You almost got Darcy, but he figured it out in time.”

“I have not the faintest idea of what you are talking about.”

“Oh, come now, Wickham. I know you were skulking about the ball at Netherfield, biding your time.”

“You need to check your sources, old man. I was not even in Hertfordshire that night although I wish I had been. I would have paid money to see Darcy come to ruin and be forced to marry a country mushroom. Imagine the poor girl’s life, leg shackled for eternity to Dour Darcy of Derbyshire.”

“What woman would not want to be married to my cousin? He is wealthy, somewhat handsome, and virile. What more could a girl ask for?”

“Do you truly believe your cousin will make her happy? I have heard that he is livid over the whole thing and you and I both know he will make her life absolutely miserable. He is rigid and unbending. I feel sorry for Miss Elizabeth.”

Richard quickly realized Wickham had no hand in the compromise, and it was an easy task to ascertain if he was telling the truth about not being in Hertfordshire the night of the ball. It seems that Miss Elizabeth, or rather, Mrs. Darcy had indeed simply tripped on the terrace and fell into Darcy’s arms.

He returned to the colonel’s office and immediately noticed an older man. At one time he would have been handsome and fit. Indeed, he still was trim, but there were lines of worry around his mouth and his shoulders

were bowed forward as though the weight of the world lay on them.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam, might I introduce you to our local magistrate, Mr. Thomas Bennet of Longbourn.”

Hiding his surprise, Richard took Mr. Bennet’s hand in welcome and said, “I am very glad to meet you, sir. I understand congratulations are in order on the marriage of your second eldest to Mr. Darcy.”

Richard did this for one reason. He wished Mr. Bennet to know he had inside knowledge. If he was as intelligent as his niece, he’d seek more information from him. Information he would gladly share and set the man’s mind at ease. His only concern was that Mr. Bennet would lump him into the same clay mold as Darcy. The marriage settlement had been a travesty and grievous insult. He might not wish to speak with him at all.

“Thank you for that, sir. I am surprised that a colonel in his Majesty’s army would

have knowledge of a poor country squire's daughter's marriage."

"England can be surprisingly small and you would be amazed at whom we have in common." Richard cut a glance toward Colonel Forster, who had a very confused look on his face. "Where do I sign so we can ship that useless piece of sheep dung to London?"

After he'd signed the documents, Mr. Bennet stopped him from leaving the room.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam, the day is lengthening. Were you planning on traveling back to London?"

"I had thought of taking a room at the inn." In hopes of seeing the vision of beauty again. "I will set out at first light."

"No need for that. We have a guest room which has recently been aired out and my wife sets a good table. I would like to offer you our hospitality and hear more about our common acquaintance."

"Mr. Bennet, I must admit that when I met

you, I had hoped you would extend some form of invitation. As it is, I saw a beautiful woman as I passed through your delightful village and if I gave you a description, you may be able to tell me where I can find her and lay my heart at her door.”

Mr. Bennet’s congeniality disappeared in an instant.

“If you are another skirt chasing officer like the one locked up, you can find your own bed for the night, sir. I will not harbor a licentious cad beneath my roof.”

“You misunderstand me, Mr. Bennet. I was struck by her beauty and would only like an introduction. As you are from here, you may know who she is.”

“Was she tall and blonde with three duplicates walking either by her side or behind?”

Surprised once again, Richard replied, “Yes, she was.”

“Come for dinner and I will tell you who

she is.”

Both men turned and said their farewells to Colonel Forster, and Richard followed Mr. Bennet’s carriage to a decent sized manor. He stabled his horse, then went around to the front entrance where a butler greeted him and took him to Mr. Bennet’s library.

His whole impression of the manor and Mr. Bennet was one of genteel country living. They were nowhere near as wealthy as Darcy – few in England were – but there were priceless paintings on the wall and expensive bric-a-brac scattered about that almost screamed of quiet wealth. Even Mr. Bennet’s clothes were well cut and well tailored. He was not as impoverished as Darcy made him out to be.



Upon entry into the library, Mr. Bennet made the shushing motion and with a jerk of his head indicated Richard was to enter

without saying a word. Intrigued, he did as bid. Once settled with a brandy within easy reach, the older gentleman leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his stomach.

“Now, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Enlighten me on who we know in common.”

“I had the most fortunate experience of meeting an intelligent young lady who readily admits to studying *The Art of War*. A book she received from her father.”

“She reads ancient works, does she?”

“Not only reads but studies and understands the concept of laying far reaching plans and keeping the enemy in the dark until it is too late.”

“She sounds like someone I know very well.”

“You should. She is after all your niece and my cousin by marriage.”

Bennet’s reaction was brief, but telling when he shared that piece of information.

“I am surprised. Elizabeth is usually more

careful with what information she releases to *relative* strangers.”

“I appreciate the pun, Mr. Bennet. It was but an inconsequential comment and she did not elaborate further, most likely in the hopes I would not think further on the subject, but my job in the army is to interrogate captured spies, so I have an annoying tendency to analyze every sentence uttered.”

“Good to know, Colonel. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.” He studied Richard for a moment longer and then began to speak. “As you have met Elizabeth, dare I ask how things are going in that quarter?”

“I will admit, my cousin has made a hash of things. He is first and foremost a gentleman and has always behaved as such.” Mr. Bennet harrumphed and rolled his eyes. “I have learned he deviated from his behavior while here, and I have a theory as to why.”

“Please, enthrall me. Explain how a *gentleman* would say that my niece was

handsome, but not handsome enough to tempt him and was barely tolerable.”

“He said that?”

“At a local assembly, in her hearing. He looked directly at her and said those words when his friend Bingley offered to introduce her for a dance.”

“Has he done *anything* right whilst here?”

“Yes. He left.”

Richard couldn’t help the harsh eruption of laughter that escaped his mouth. He liked this man’s humor.

“Ah, but he left with something precious.”

“He did at that.”

“Mr. Bennet, what I am about to share does not excuse his atrocious manners, but if you allow me to explain his mindset when he first arrived in Meryton, you might understand his bad mood.” Richard then went on to explain the near elopement of Darcy’s sister, and of Wickham’s betrayal. How Darcy thought Elizabeth had been part of another

elaborate scheme to exhort money from his cousin. “As you well know, I have taken care of the problem with Wickham, and while I waited for your attendance as magistrate, I questioned him about the night of the ball. We all know your niece did not collaborate with him, I only solidified the facts by asking him where he was.”

“Colonel, I truly feel Mr. Darcy’s pain over the near elopement of his sister. If you hadn’t taken that cur in hand, one of my own daughters may have fallen into Mr. Wickham’s web of charms and I would have lost two beloved daughters to circumstances beyond my control.” He sat up straight in his chair. “This does not excuse the mockery of a marriage settlement he forced me to sign. I cannot even begin to tell you how disgusting that document is. If I could have saved my niece and my daughter’s reputations by any other means, I would have.”

“I have some knowledge of what the

document contains and it is indeed vile. Darcy will not remain unscathed. Of that, you can be assured.”

“Well then, Colonel,” Mr. Bennet raised his glass of brandy in salute, “let us drink to the chastisement of your cousin and hopefully a reformation. Otherwise, he will miss out on knowing one of the most delightful young ladies in all of England.”

“Sir, I have only spoken with your niece once, yet I already know she is a force to be reckoned with.”

“She is at that.”

The two men finished their drinks and then Mr. Bennet indicated they should join the ladies and he would advise his wife there was a guest for dinner.

“I hope my dear,” Mr. Bennet called out as the two men were about to enter the room where his wife sat sewing, “that you have ordered a good dinner today because I have invited a gentleman to our family party.”

“Mr. Bingley has returned?” she cried out hopefully, then fell silent when Richard entered behind her husband.

“The person of whom I speak is a gentleman and a stranger.” Bennet ushered him further into the room. “May I introduce Colonel Fitzwilliam. Colonel, this is my wife, Mrs. Frances Bennet.”

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Bennet. I am very pleased to meet you.”

“Did you say the colonel was joining us for supper, Mr. Bennet?”

“I did, indeed.”

“Then, if you would excuse me, I must see the cook about our extra guest.”

“Mrs. Bennet, also advise Hill that we will need the guest chamber fitted out once more as the gentleman will also spend the night.”

“Oh,” she breathed out with an almost worshipful sigh. Richard could practically see the wheels turning in her head and wondered how long it would take before any, or all of

her other daughters who remained at home were sent to the drawing room for his perusal.

He knew his view was jaded, but he'd been around for too long and had witnessed too many mamas trying to find husbands for their daughters to *not* expect some form of machinations. In less than ten minutes, a boisterous girl, barely fifteen if he had to try and guess her age, flounced into the room.

"Oooo... Mama was not lying. There is an officer here. How do you do Colonel, my name is Lydia Bennet."

He took note that Mr. Bennet did nothing to stop his daughter's forward behavior.

"I see you were let out of the nursery for the day," Richard said coolly. "Lovely. How old are you, child? Twelve, thirteen? I am sure you are anxious for your turn to come out in society properly."

As he spoke, Miss Lydia's mouth opened wider and wider, her eyes flashing with anger. He figured it was a safe bet that no one had

ever put her in her place. He could see why Darcy had a hard time with the family.

“Close your mouth, Lydia or flies will start to congregate,” Mr. Bennet said in a tired voice.

“Papa!” she exclaimed and actually stomped her foot in anger. “He said I was only twelve or thirteen!” She whirled to face Richard, her back ramrod straight, her chin and ample breasts pushed forward. “I am nearly sixteen and already out.”

She reminded him of a young kitten trying desperately to appear larger and more ferocious when cornered by other cats.

“Your behavior is certainly juvenile,” Mr. Bennet said. “No young lady enters a room and introduces herself. You have been taught better manners; you choose to ignore them.”

She began to protest anew when the beautiful vision Richard had seen earlier in the day entered the room. He forced himself to close his own mouth, which had threatened to

compete with Miss Lydia for how far it could fall open, and noticed the smirk on Mr. Bennet's face.

"This, Colonel Fitzwilliam, is my eldest daughter Jane."

The devil take him if Bennet hadn't set him up. He liked the man even more.

"How do you do, Miss Bennet. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Good afternoon, Colonel. Are you here long in Meryton?"

"No, I leave tomorrow at first light. I have finished the task I came here for and must return to London."

"And what was that task, Colonel, or is it secretive military movements and you cannot share the information?"

"Nothing secretive. I brought a soldier up on charges of conduct unbecoming an officer and he will be sent to either debtor's prison or take a very long boat ride."

"Which officer?" Lydia interrupted.

“Lieutenant Wickham.”

“Wickham! No! That cannot be!” Lydia jumped to her feet and raced to her father, taking his hands in hers. “Please tell me he is not being sent away. He would not have debt if it weren’t for that horrid Mr. Darcy.”

“Miss Lydia,” Richard broke into her cries. “I am fairly certain Mr. Wickham has been spreading tales of how he was denied a rightful bequest as well as a certain living. I can tell you, with certainty, he did not pass on the full truth of the matter. He received one thousand pounds upon the death of Mr. Darcy’s father and was paid out the equivalent of the living in the amount of three thousand pounds. If he was destitute, it was not by the hand of Mr. Darcy, but his own.”

“How would you know?” she challenged. “I am sure Mr. Darcy has told lies, knowing my Wickham was revealing his true character.”

“I know, Miss Lydia, because I was there

when Mr. Wickham signed documents agreeing to the three thousand pounds only two years ago, and I was there at the reading of the will and watched the solicitor give him the one thousand pounds that very day. Mr. Darcy did not have to *tell* me anything. I was there.”

“Why would *you* be there?”

“I am Mr. Darcy’s cousin.” He heard Miss Bennet gasp softly.

“Lydia,” Mr. Bennet said in a deadly quiet voice. “What did you mean when you said, *my Wickham*? I hope you did not allow that man any liberties.”

Richard noticed the shift in her body and the furtive licking of her lips. *Has the instincts of an alley cat, this one*, he thought, and waited to hear what tale she would spin about George Wickham, who had a penchant for seducing young, innocent girls.

“No, Papa, we engaged in only light flirtations. Mr. Wickham always behaved the

gentleman, but he let me know in lots of ways that he had singled me out for his *particular* attention.”

Inwardly, Richard cringed. He well knew what Wickham’s particular attentions were. With luck, she would not grow large with a child.

“Come with me, daughter. We are going to have a long conversation in my library.”

Mr. Bennet and Miss Lydia left the room. As they departed the room, another two daughters entered, followed by a flushed Mrs. Bennet. One girl wore spectacles and appeared closer in age to Mrs. Darcy, the other one looked about the same age as Miss Lydia, although not as tall.

“Where is Mr. Bennet going with Lydia?” Mrs. Bennet asked.

“Papa had something to discuss with her. They shall return shortly.” Miss Bennet turned her attention back to Richard, “Colonel Fitzwilliam, may I introduce you to my

sisters?” she asked quietly.

“Please do.”

“This is Mary” – indicating the sister wearing glasses – “and this is Catherine or Kitty as the family calls her. Mary, Kitty, this is Colonel Fitzwilliam. He is joining us for the evening, returning to London tomorrow morning.”

He noticed Miss Bennet did not share with them the fact he was Darcy’s cousin. Mrs. Bennet began to flutter and organized the girls in different chairs, leaving the seat next to him empty. He wondered only briefly until Mrs. Bennet revealed her grand plan.

“I see you already met my Lydia. She is such a lively girl and already a favorite with the officers of the ___shire Militia. She would make a fine officer’s wife.”

It seemed Mrs. Bennet was offering the youngest up for marriage. Why not Miss Bennet? She was the eldest and far more beautiful than the others, besides, he was *not*

interested in an air headed child, like Miss Lydia. It was time to let Mrs. Bennet know her matchmaking would not find fertile ground with him.

“There are few officers who can well afford a wife.”

“But you are a colonel. Have you no fortune or money set aside for your future felicity?”

“As a single man and officer, I have enough to live comfortably, but to support a wife in the lifestyle she would expect, is beyond my means at this time.” He dared look Mrs. Bennet in the eye. “And even if I was, Madam, I would not marry a child who is not even sixteen and has not yet learned how to behave like a lady in polite company.”

Mrs. Bennet huffed and looked about the room, clearly not knowing how to respond to his words. He dared to glance toward Miss Bennet. She had her head bowed demurely, but he noticed a tinge of color on her cheeks

and was positive she was embarrassed by her mother's antics. He had only been in Longbourn for a little under an hour and his personality was one that got along with almost anybody, but he could see how Darcy would have been absolutely horrified to be shackled with them and understood a little better why he hadn't wanted Georgiana exposed to them, most especially the youngest.

He had to hide a smile. It would do his cousin good to have his feathers ruffled once in a while. Darcy lived such a quiet, somber life and Georgiana was treading down the same lonely path. Elizabeth Darcy, née Bennet would bring a breath of fresh air into their lives. If they let her.

Chapter Eleven

“Good morning, Colonel.”

“Good morning, Bennet.”

Richard had arisen at his normal hour and was surprised to see Mr. Bennet already situated at the breakfast table, a cup of coffee by his empty plate. Too used to being the only one in his parent's household to rise early, he had forgotten that estate owners were known to keep country hours in order to get most of their estate work done during the light of day.

“Did you sleep well?” Bennet asked.

“I did, sir. Thank you for extending your hospitality.”

“Truly, Colonel, it was our pleasure, but I did not do it just to extend hospitality. I have other reasons for wanting you close by.”

“And that is...?”

“I have both you and my daughter under the same roof and can keep a watchful eye.”

Richard could not help himself. He laughed.

“I appreciate a watchful father and set myself up for your caprice and humor when I asked if you could point me in the direction of the beauty walking in Meryton.”

“Jane, without even trying, makes mortal men forget to breathe. As her father, I must look out for her because she has the uncanny ability to see only good in everyone.”

“Everyone?”

“Yes, everyone. When I tell her of Wickham’s misdeeds, which I will because I do not hide the ugly side of life from my daughters, she will try to find redemption in his behavior and actions.”

“With Wickham, that is an impossibility.”

“Not for Jane. She truly is exceptional.” Bennet assessed him carefully, then began speaking again. “Do you know Mr. Bingley

and his sisters?” Richard could not help but grimace when he replied that he did. “Then you know Miss Bingley holds herself above many people, even those who are higher ranked in society.”

“I do.”

“And you know that if the opportunity presents itself, and she knows there is no direct societal fallout for her behavior, she will abuse the person or persons she thinks below her station.”

“Again, I am aware of that.”

“Then, let me reveal a facet of Jane’s personality. Miss Bingley wrote a scathing letter to her – I am supposedly unaware of this letter – whereupon she told my daughter any correspondence sent to her would be burned and if Miss Bingley saw Jane on the street, she would give her the cut direct.”

“She actually said that? In a letter?”

“Yes, she did. I am a gentleman and a substantial landowner. As such, Jane is far

above Miss Bingley who does not even have one foot out of the ditch of trade. However, I digress. Jane, heartbroken over the abandonment of Mr. Bingley and blatant disrespect displayed by Miss Bingley, still holds them in high regard and wishes them nothing but future happiness.”

“I am humbled by her act of forgiveness,” Richard shook his head. “Would that there were more people like her in this world.”

“Now you see why I protect her. I could do nothing for Elizabeth as circumstances dictated what had to happen, and she is a different woman. Like her father, her courage always rises when faced with the trials of life and she does not see everything as warm and fuzzy. She and Jane are opposite sides of a coin.”

“Darcy may not appreciate his wife in full now, but your niece is the perfect woman for him. I will tell you I am of the belief he held her in some regard prior to the compromise.”

“I disagree with that notion.”

“You would because you do not know his character. I have known him since we were boys running about catching frogs and learning how to ride horses together.” Richard finished his coffee then pushed his chair back from the table. “He told me he danced with her at the ball at Netherfield.”

“He danced with others, Colonel. There is nothing earth shaking in that fact.”

“No, Mr. Bennet,” Richard explained. “He danced with the sister of a friend who was his host and therefore duty called for him to honor her with one set. Elizabeth was the only lady outside his intimate circle that he danced with. Darcy never dances at balls. He does not want to raise the expectation of desperate mothers and their daughters, yet he asked your niece to dance.”

Bennet now leaned back in his chair.

“He asked her to dance before that night.”

“He did?” Richard could not hold in his

look of surprise.

“Yes, once at a gathering at Sir William’s, and Lizzy told us how he asked her to dance a reel at Netherfield Park.”

“My God! He is in love with her!”

“She declined both times.”

“No wonder he is all sixes and sevens when it comes to her. Truly, he must be quite besotted.”

“Yes, he must be in love, which explains why the marriage settlement was so generous,” came the sarcastic reply from Elizabeth’s uncle.

“Mr. Bennet, if you knew how often Wickham has tried to hurt him by any means, you would understand the sense of betrayal he felt when he imagined your niece acting as Wickham’s accomplice. It would have cut him deeply.”

“I suppose I will have to take your word for it because we have not seen any evidence of affection or even good manners when it

comes to that gentleman – and I use the word loosely in reference to him.”

“Maybe in your next letter to your niece, you could begin to hint at his goodness. It is there, beneath layers of shyness and awkward behavior.”

“I would love nothing better than to correspond with my niece, but your cousin has forbidden her from having contact with her direct family. It was part of his outrageous demands along with her not taking all of her belongings with her when she left for Pemberley.”

It was only because he was used to controlling his emotions that Richard didn't show a physical response of disgust at Mr. Bennet's words. What had Darcy been thinking?

“First, sir, let me get this straight in my mind. You are not allowed to write to your niece, nor can she write to you?”

“Yes, she may not have any contact with

direct family,” he stated again.

Richard noted that both times Bennet emphasized the phrase *direct family* and held back a smile. Even he could see a way to circumvent that order and stay within the ridiculous parameters Darcy had set down.

“I see, and you believe your niece is currently at Pemberley?”

“Yes, that is where Darcy said he was taking her after the wedding,” Bennet answered with a firm voice, but his body shifted and Richard knew immediately he was not being truthful. How interesting.

“I am happy to advise you that she is in London at Darcy House.”

“So close,” Bennet almost breathed out on a sigh and his lips quivered in a smile.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Richard knew Mr. Bennet was very aware of where his niece was. It seemed Mrs. Darcy had already successfully navigated around one of Darcy’s ludicrous roadblocks. The more he learned of

the family, the more he liked them. By this time, Miss Bennet had come down for her breakfast and joined the gentlemen at the table.

“Good morning, Miss Bennet,” Richard said after he’d stood to greet her.

“Good morning, Colonel. Papa.”

She sat to the left of her father, directly across from Richard. He noticed that her cheeks were tinged a lovely pink, but she never raised her eyes to his, instead she concentrated on buttering a toasted slice of bread.

“Does your family ever come to town, Mr. Bennet?” Richard asked, hoping Bennet would say yes and then he could finagle an invitation to visit them.

“I hate town,” – his hopes sank faster than a child’s paper boat – “however, Jane will be traveling to town after Christmas with her aunt and uncle.”

“Would this be relatives from Mrs.

Bennet's side of the family?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, they are."

"And while Miss Bennet is visiting *her* relatives, would you mind if I called on them and brought my newest cousin with me?"

"I would give my approval except for the fact Elizabeth can have no contact with my daughter."

"Yes, that is a bit of a conundrum."

Richard turned his attention to Jane. "Miss Bennet, if Mrs. Darcy attended with me, could I offer to walk out with you while she visits?"

During this time, Jane had watched both men with pleasure and then blushed a deeper shade of pink when the colonel asked if he could visit with her specifically.

"I... I would be delighted, Colonel." She looked back down at her plate and dropped some preserves on her toast.

"Excellent." Richard turned his attention to Mr. Bennet who looked both amused and disgruntled that he had practically asked to

court his daughter right in front of him.

“I never underestimated you, Colonel Fitzwilliam, but I must admit, I did not expect a frontal attack so soon in the game.”

“I believe in the adage of *carpe diem*. One never knows when an opportunity such as this will present itself again.”

“Nor that of rifling through important papers.” Richard’s eyes narrowed. Bennet once again had toyed with him. “I told you, sir. Nothing in this house escapes my notice. I trust what you learned will not be used against my niece.”

“Never. She has earned my respect and as a member of my family, my loyalty.”

“Good to know.” Bennet turned his attention to his daughter. “Jane, even though the man put you on the spot with his sudden request for your company once you are in town, I will ask that you answer me honestly. Do you wish for Colonel Fitzwilliam to call on you?”

She hesitated only briefly. “I would like to get to know the colonel better, Papa, and as much as I love Mama, I am glad it would take place away from Longbourn.”

“Then you have my permission.” Bennet rose to his feet. “I will say my farewell now, Colonel. I hear my wife and daughters coming down the stairs and Jane will not be left unchaperoned. You will find my youngest daughter on better behavior this morning. She and her next eldest sister have been relegated back to the nursery until they turn eighteen.”

Richard bade him farewell and took his seat just as Mrs. Bennet entered the room, followed by Mary, Kitty, and a sullen Lydia.

“Jane,” Mrs. Bennet began, “I am surprised to see you alone with the colonel.”

“Papa has only just left, Mama. We were not alone.”

“Oh good,” she huffed out as she sat, “One misalliance in this family is enough.”

Richard grinned. His words of having no

fortune had obviously set the mother against him as a future son-in-law. That was fine, for now. If things progressed with Miss Bennet, he would tell her that he was quite well off and they would have nothing to worry about.

Within the hour, he cantered down the drive of Longbourn, fully aware that one set of crystalline blue eyes followed his progress from her bedroom window. The day was clear and the traffic light and he arrived in London in under four hours. He attended the War Office and searched for one of his best aides.

“Craigsuir, I have a task and need it completed by end of day or early tomorrow,” he said as soon as the man had saluted properly.

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you to look into naval Captain James Bennet who died in ’98. I want all pertinent information about his career, his family, and finances.” He saw the flicker of interest in the young man’s eyes. “No, he is

not a traitor, but I need to know that his family has been properly taken care of. That is all.”

He dismissed the soldier and then returned to his office to see what his next assignment was. He always enjoyed his work, his career, knowing that what he did was important for the cause of King and Country, yet since meeting the ethereal Miss Bennet, he had a sudden longing to settle down. To finally put down roots and make a home.



The next day the stately grandfather clock had barely chimed the hour of four when Darcy welcomed Richard into his study. Soon they were ensconced in his library, enjoying a good brandy. Elizabeth was out on some errand. To where, Darcy had no knowledge. He had not engaged his wife in conversation since the disaster following their tour of the house.

“I had an interesting time in Meryton. Did you know Mr. Bennet is one of the local magistrates, and as such, came to sign Wickham’s arrest warrant?”

“Did he know who you were?”

“Not at the time and even when he did, he still invited me to dine and stay the night so I would not have to put up in the local inn.”

“He must have had a reason.”

“Other than being a gentleman?” Richard waved his hand in dismissal. “Let us not get sidetracked, I told you that in order to share some interesting things I observed and discovered.”

“About Wickham?”

“No, you dolt. About your wife’s family.”

“What was there to discover? The inferiority of her connections? Their total want of propriety, so frequently portrayed by the mother and three younger sisters, and occasionally even by the father?”

“I no longer wonder why no one there

liked you.” Richard leaned closer. “Stay quiet and listen.” When Darcy looked like he was about to interrupt again, he said, “That is an order.”

Darcy clamped his lips tight.

“First, Wickham was not at the ball; he was not even in Hertfordshire. Your wife did not conspire with him in any way, shape or form. You owe her a very large apology and I suggest you ask your valet to strengthen the material in the knees of your trousers.”

“Whatever for?” Darcy felt as though a pit had settled in his stomach.

“You will be begging her mercy by the time I have finished telling all I know.”

“Dare I ask you to continue?”

“Oh yes, You absolutely must.”

“You are too happy about all this. It does not bode well for me.”

“No. It does not.” Richard grinned and the pit in his stomach grew two sizes larger. “As I enjoyed a very expensive brandy in Mr.

Bennet's library, I noticed several things besides the quality of his liquor."

"Such as?"

"He had many books. Rare books, new books, and a large family Bible."

"I am sure you were suitably impressed."

"Frankly, I was. His library may not be as large as yours, but I would bet you two shillings he has more rare books than even you."

"I highly doubt that," scoffed Darcy.

"This is still not what I found so interesting. I am sure when you huffed and puffed your way through the house, you took no notice of the expensive paintings, well-made furniture, and priceless little artifacts scattered about. For an impoverished family with an entailed estate, they live fairly high on the instep. The dinner Mrs. Bennet provided would rival some of the great houses here in town."

"I will not deny that Mrs. Bennet is a good

hostess. It is her vulgar manners I detest.”

“No doubt and the little baggage that is her youngest daughter makes them all seem worse than they are.”

“I see you met Miss Lydia. Crazy about officers and the such. She chased one of them around the room, with a sword, at Bingley’s ball! Can you imagine?”

“From her? Yes. Now, let me finish my story. Are you aware that your wife is not even the daughter of Mr. Bennet?” Darcy’s eyes widened in surprise. “She is his niece. Her father was Mr. Bennet’s younger brother.”

“How did you find all this out?”

“Prior to leaving for Meryton, I stopped by here to have breakfast with Georgiana. Imagine my surprise when I discovered Mrs. Darcy at the breakfast table and not on her way to Pemberley as previously planned. We had an interesting conversation and she let slip the fact she was Bennet’s niece. We will speak later about that bruise on her cheek. But

enough of that, I wish to tell you about my time at Longbourn.”

“For someone who is used to barking out orders, you are taking an inordinate amount of time to relay the facts,” Darcy groused.

“Patience man, I am getting there. After dinner and a lovely time in the presence of Miss Jane Bennet – oh, by the by – Bingley was a fool to have left her behind. Tut tut, no interrupting” – when Darcy opened his mouth to decry Bingley’s decision – “after we had retired for the evening, and I was sure all were asleep, I took myself down to Mr. Bennet’s well stocked library and settled in to see who was faithfully recorded in that family Bible I spotted earlier.”

He speared Darcy with a hard look.

“Did you know there has been a Bennet at Longbourn since King Henry sat on the throne? They have been landed gentry for almost as long as your family. In that regard, you and your wife are equals. I found the

entry for Mrs. Darcy's father, James Bennet. He married Isabella de Cortez in the year '88 and your wife was born May of the year '91. Her mother died in '95 and her father in '98."

"What does this have to do with anything? It changes nothing that she is the niece and not the daughter."

"You are so impatient. I am getting to that." Richard leaned back in his chair and stretched out his legs, crossing one ankle over the other. "While at Mr. Bennet's desk, I spied his ledger. Seeing as I had already delved into the family tree, I decided to check out his finances." Richard straightened. "I heard you say their estate only brings in about two thousand pounds per annum." Darcy nodded in affirmation. "That sum is far, far below what it actually brings in. Longbourn turns a profit of nearly four thousand a year."

"What? How is that possible?"

"Mr. Bennet is very clever. He dares not put all the money back into the estate because

of the entail. His wife and daughters will not profit from any of their hard work. However, he has found a workaround. Mrs. Bennet and her four daughters each have a tidy sum of money to spend each month as they like. A little over a thousand pounds is put back into the estate for its requirements, and the rest is gifted to one Elizabeth Bennet.” At Darcy’s look of outright surprise, Richard chuckled softly. “With a little searching, I found another ledger which carefully tracks all of the money gifted to the former Miss Bennet. In turn, his niece takes these remaining funds and purchases artwork, furniture – rare books – etcetera, and the rest is redirected into lucrative investments, all held in trust in the names of her aunt and female cousins. When Mr. Bennet finally joins his Maker, nothing of value remains in the house as it belongs to Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy, née Bennet. Mr. Bennet’s name is not listed as the owner of anything other than the land and the stone and mortar

of the manor.”

“That is why he wanted the clause ensuring anything she brought to the marriage or obtained afterward remains hers and hers alone.”

“Yes, as I said, very clever of them.”

“But Elizabeth still has nothing to show from all this.”

“Worried your wife was not taken care of financially by her family? Does sitting atop the moral high ground of your pride make you feel a mite chilled?”

He glared at Richard. “I had time to assess my initial behavior and anger. As such, I made an appointment with my solicitors to make changes to the marriage settlement and Elizabeth will receive what Mrs. Darcy rightly deserves. I will pick up the amended documents the day after tomorrow and leave for Longbourn immediately following to attain Mr. Bennet’s signature.”

“That is all well and good, cousin,

however, your wife does not need your money.”

“What? You just said she does not receive a penny from her uncle.”

“I followed a hunch and had one of my aides search our military records for a James Bennet who died in ‘98. It turns out, at the time of his death, he was Admiral Bennet, a decorated war hero who died at sea. At the time of his death, he left his only daughter an estate in Hertfordshire and over eighty thousand pounds in the bank.”

“Where...,” Darcy felt all the air escape his lungs. Elizabeth was an heiress. A landowner. “Where in Hertfordshire?”

At the sly smile stretching across Richard’s face, he knew the answer before he spoke the words. Netherfield Park. Of course.

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After Richard left his study, Darcy went over everything which had occurred in the

past month and shook his head. It seemed a lifetime ago that he held Elizabeth in his arms while she struggled to free his button from that infernal scrap of lace. Even in his anger, he had relished the feel of her womanly form in his arms. She was a delightful package and now that he knew she'd never dallied with Wickham, they could safely consummate their marriage and move forward.

But how to approach her knowing she held such justified anger toward him. Was it truly within his right, as a gentleman, to demand she allow him to her bed? He could force her to comply and beget an heir without her goodwill and he wouldn't be the first husband to accomplish what was required. Many a night at his gentleman's club he'd listened to men grouse about their frigid wives, and then laugh among themselves by saying the wife didn't have to be good, she just had to be there. Warmth and affection were sought elsewhere.

He never truly understood that sentiment until faced with the reality of his own cold union. If Elizabeth did not thaw towards him, the marriage bed would indeed be unwelcoming, and although he had always thought he would never stray outside the bonds of marriage...

He was no saint and well knew the joys of a willing woman beneath his body. For his peace of mind, he may be forced to take another discreet paramour in order to sate the passionate side of his character, but not yet. His hopes and dreams remained centered on Elizabeth. The spark of love, temporarily squashed with everything that happened, still lay burning like an ember in his heart. One hint of hope from the direction of his wife, and it would flame brightly once again.

Chapter Twelve

It was a very different Darcy who stood at the front door of Longbourn from the one who first entered Hertfordshire in October. He had picked up the amended agreement as soon as his solicitors sent word and repaired immediately to Meryton. After refreshing himself at the inn, he made the mile long jaunt toward a required apology to the man who had raised his wife since the age of four.

Much humbled, he silently handed his card to Griggs, the butler, and then waited in the front foyer. Given what he'd learned from Richard, he looked about him with what seemed like new eyes. Two clever paintings graced the main wall and the slender hall table below held exquisite porcelain figurines edged with gold leafing.

His cousin was right. He *had* huffed and puffed his way through the house and had totally missed the elegant wainscotting and marbled entrance. His self-righteous arrogance had blinded him to more than his wife's good manners. What struck him more than the quiet elegance of the home was the silence. He could not recall, with any clarity, when there had not been the sounds of conversation and laughter in this house. He found it a bit unsettling if he were being totally honest.

Griggs returned and after taking his overcoat, gloves, and hat, led him to the master's study. At his knock, a firm 'Enter,' was heard and with a quiet thank you to the butler, Darcy entered the room to face his father-in-law for the first time since the wedding. He stepped in the room, gave a formal nod of the head, and said, "Sir."

"Come in, Mr. Darcy. Let us get this business settled, once and for all."

Darcy handed over the documents and

then took a seat on the chair directly opposite Bennet's desk. He spoke not a word as Bennet read over the marriage settlement and used the time to peruse the shelves. Once again, as Richard said, signs of wealth were everywhere. His fingers itched to trace the bindings on some of the titles he noticed on the upper shelves.

On the corner of the desk, he noted a pile of slender books that looked like journals. More than likely the ledgers Richard had pilfered through the night he stayed here. As far as Darcy could tell, the expression on Mr. Bennet's face changed not one iota. Richard may have perceived minute alterations, as he was an expert in reading how a person held their body, or even how their breathing altered to give away their thoughts. He remembered how his cousin had once told him that where a person's eyes wandered during the speech was a good indicator of whether they were telling the truth, or fabricating a lie.

He could have used that skill with Wickham when they were lads. It might have saved him a boatload of trouble and heartache later in their lives.

Also, he would have known Elizabeth was truthful from the very start. Another heartache he could have avoided. Regardless, he was here to make amends and try to reset the clock of his marriage. His ruminations came to an end when Bennet finally laid the document down and gave a heavy sigh.

“This is more in keeping with how my niece should have been treated.”

“I agree.”

“We never discussed what actually happened that night. Your judgment was clouded by anger and you refused to see reason. I have obviously heard Lizzy’s side of the story, are you prepared to give me your version of what took place?”

“Miss Elizabeth – that is, Mrs. Darcy – went out onto the terrace. The night air was

cold and I worried she had gone outside without a shawl or something else to keep her warm. I followed to encourage her to return before she caught a chill. At the same time, I thought I saw Wickham sneaking behind a bush.” Once more he felt the same ripple of anger that had gone through his body that night. “Knowing the way his mind works, I became convinced Elizabeth was involved in an elaborate ruse to cheat money out of me, confirmed when she turned and fell into my arms.”

“I will shoot you with my own pistol if you intimate one more time that my niece set you up for a compromise. Lizzy cannot stand the sight of you. She would never willingly shackle herself to the likes of you.”

She cannot stand the sight of me? He blanched at those words and pushed the unpalatable thought aside. Mr. Bennet continued speaking.

“My adopted daughter’s only mistake was

leaving the ballroom to ensure her flighty cousin had not slipped outside with an officer. She did not compromise you. She did not set you up, and she is now paying for that mistake with a loveless marriage to a man who is not tempted by her looks and finds her barely tolerable.” Once again, his horrid words came back to haunt him. Would he never be free from them? “She never sought your good opinion nor your approbation. She is very likely the only woman in the whole of England, besides my darling Jane, who cares not one bit for your money.”

“I have been a fool. What must she think of me?”

“She tried not to think of you at all. If it were not for the fact Miss Bingley, so desirous of casting my niece in a bad light, brought everyone’s attention to the tear in Lizzy’s gown, we might have been able to brush this whole thing off.” Bennet glanced down at the contentious papers in his hand. “As it was, you

had to wed. There was no other way out of this debacle.”

“I know that I did not help matters with the grievous settlement I forced you to sign.” He held Mr. Bennet’s gaze with his own, hoping the man before him realized he was truly sorry for his past actions. “My history with Wickham is convoluted. Nothing but one misery piled on top of another. When it comes to him, I am unable to think in a reasonable manner and Elizabeth became caught in the crossfire of our antagonistic relationship.”

He rose and paced to the window, staring outside without seeing anything, his mind fully engaged on what had happened over the past few weeks, knowing he had to be completely truthful with his wife’s uncle. “My family has always expected me to make a brilliant marriage, as in taking a wife from a titled family.” He turned slightly from the window and looked at Mr. Bennet. “My mother is the daughter of an earl, and my

father's grandfather is a duke. The expectation of me marrying within the first circle has never been spoken aloud, but fully expected."

He turned back to the window.

"In vain, I struggled. I ardently admire Elizabeth and became torn over these feelings and as such, was very aware of where she was at all times no matter where we were. A house, a church, a ball. I knew immediately when she went out onto the terrace and was truly concerned, she would catch a chill. It was only when I thought she was involved with Wickham that every good thought, every encounter, and conversation became twisted with hate. To think that the woman I held in great esteem colluded with him tore me apart. I was now forced to marry a woman whom I believed was in a conspiracy with my greatest enemy. It became my mission to make her absolutely miserable. I could not touch Wickham, but I could break her. I have no other words to add. I behaved in a manner

that was most ungentlemanly. She has every right to hate me.”

He was startled when a hand fell upon his shoulder.

“Son, I will not deny you made a mess of things for no other reason than hurt pride. I suspected all along you had strong feelings for my Lizzy.”

“How could you have known that?”

“You were far too angry for your feelings to not be engaged.” Bennet returned to his seat by his desk. “May I safely assume we can now stay in contact with Elizabeth with no reprisals from you?”

“Yes, of course. I never should have said she could not correspond with her family.”

“You said she could not have direct contact with immediate family members.”

His attention was caught, further heightened by the gleam in Bennet’s eye.

“I assume she found a way to circumvent me?”

“Most definitely. As your cousin has probably informed you, Elizabeth is my brother’s daughter. She is not related to Mrs. Bennet’s side of the family. We had set up a way to funnel all correspondence through them as they are not *direct* family.”

Darcy shook his head and murmured, “She is so very clever.”

“That she is and once the two of you have settled your difference, she will be a valuable ally and help meet.”

“I will always treasure her but I cannot account for how society will take to her.”

Even with her estate and fortune, she was simply the niece of a country squire.

“Mr. Darcy – Fitzwilliam – I can tell you, with impunity, that Elizabeth will sail through your high society like the lady she is and always has been. I do not tell people about her background as they would treat her differently and we would have had every fortune hunter flocking to our door.” Bennet leaned back in

his chair and folded his hands over his stomach. “Elizabeth is the granddaughter of Count Frederick de Cortez of Luciana.”

Darcy was surprised to hear Elizabeth’s grandfather was a count. He knew he had missed something given the smile which spread across his father-in-law’s face.

“Do you know anything about Spanish nobility?” At Darcy’s shake of his head, Bennet continued. “When a Spanish noble has ‘de’ in front of their name, it means they are of royal blood.”

He waited while Darcy digested this morsel of news. His wife had royal blood... *How thick?* was his next thought.

“They are minor nobility. Distant cousins, but close enough Elizabeth had to send notice to the Spanish Ambassador advising him of her marriage in order for royal court documents in Spain to be updated.”

“Are they aware of how the marriage came about?”

“No, details such as this are not important, but be advised, now that you are in town, expect a visit from the Ambassador. He has been a diligent correspondent, even after Elizabeth’s grandfather passed away. I think he took a liking to our girl.”

“Should I be concerned about his interest?”

Bennet laughed out loud. “No. The ambassador is happily married and his wife also adores Elizabeth. She is often invited to dinner at Hertford House whenever she is in London and Lizzy was to travel with them to Spain this summer.”

“There is so much I never knew.”

“True, and there is more if you can stomach some bitter news.” Bennet pulled the lanyard by his bookcase and the butler soon knocked on the door. “Griggs, would you ask Hill to find Jane and have her come at once. Tell her to bring the letter Miss Bingley wrote when they left Meryton.”

“Yes, sir,” Griggs said with a polite nod before closing the door.

Bennet did not say much more and read through the legal document again. A soft knock on the door was the only thing that had him lift his head. “Enter,” he called out and Jane Bennet entered the room, surprise etched on her normally calm façade at the sight of Darcy seated across from her father.

“You asked for me, Papa?”

“I did, Jane. You brought the letter?”

“Yes.”

Bennet held out his hand and she, quite unwillingly if Darcy had to hazard a guess, handed it over. At his nod, she took the chair next to Darcy’s.

“Mr. Darcy, you may well wonder why I asked Jane to bring this letter. Normally, I would not share information passed between my daughter and an acquaintance of hers, but you said there was so much you did not know. As you are wishing to make amends to my

family and to Elizabeth, I cannot, in good conscience, allow you to continue in ignorance of what your so-called friends do behind your back.”

With that, he handed Darcy the letter. Miss Bennet started to object, but quickly closed her mouth tight, although her eyes welled up with a hint of tears.

“Miss Bennet. I will not read this letter if it grieves you this much.”

“I do not grieve for myself, Mr. Darcy. I worry for you as you are such great friends with Mr. Bingley. I do not wish you to view him in a bad light.” She touched the edge of her eye with a trembling finger. “Please do as Papa asked. He would not have done this if it was not important.”

He cut them each a quick glance before opening the missive and read what Caroline Bingley had written to Miss Bennet after the fateful night of the ball. With each word, with each paragraph, his anger rose. The gall of the

woman, to openly state that her brother and Georgiana were as good as engaged and that his family rejoiced in the connection! He fought the urge to crumple the letter into a tight ball and consign it to the fire.

Keeping his anger reined in tight, he handed the letter back to Miss Bennet. A full five minutes passed before he could trust himself to speak.

“There is not, nor has there ever been, an understanding between Mr. Bingley and my sister. I am confident he is not aware of what Miss Bingley wrote.” He dared look Bennet in the eye. “You could have let me wallow and flounder and make a complete fool of myself, but you chose to tell me the truth.”

“Whether I like you or not, you are now my son and we protect those who belong to us.”

“Mr. Bennet, I never thought I would ever say these words, but I am glad to be counted as a member of your family.”

Bennet gave him a wry smile and seemed as though he was about to make a comment when the jangle of harnesses could be heard coming up the drive.

“Would you be willing to meet more family before you depart, Mr. Darcy?”

“Call me Darcy, and yes, I would like to meet anyone that Elizabeth holds dear.”

The three of them exited the study and made their way to the front of the house. A large carriage had, by this time, come to a halt and an outrider jumped off to pull down the steps and open the carriage door.

Darcy was impressed by the fine conveyance and wondered who these people of some means were to the Bennet family. The first to emerge was a gentleman, bearing a strong resemblance to Mrs. Bennet although younger by a few years. He turned around and gave his hand to a woman, attired in a very becoming travel ensemble. A second carriage trundled in behind them and from it tumbled

four children who, though clearly excited, didn't rush screaming to their parents, but did run toward Miss Bennet and all tried to hug her at the same time.

The smile that wreathed Miss Bennet's face astonished him. He had never seen anything but calm emanating from her person. It may have been the first time he realized just how beautiful a woman she was. No wonder Charles was lost in her presence. For a brief moment, his thoughts clouded with anger over the Bingley siblings. They had behaved as badly as him, and Caroline had stepped over the line. He would deal with her when he returned to London.

Unfortunately, it was at that moment that the gentleman had turned to face him, waiting for Bennet to perform introductions.

"Gardiner, may I introduce you to Lizzy's husband, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy saw his posture stiffen and his wife cast a wide-eyed glance at him. With

conscious effort, Darcy smoothed his features and while he did not smile, he softened his mouth and hoped he portrayed a pleasant demeanor.

“I think you must, brother.”

Bennet brought the man and woman forward. By this time, Mrs. Bennet and the three other daughters had come out of the house and were talking to the children, leaving the adults to finish their introductions.

“Darcy, this is my wife’s brother Edward Gardiner and his wife Madeline. They reside in London and my daughters look upon them with great fondness.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner,” Darcy said with a polite nod of the head. “I am well pleased to meet someone who is dear to my wife.”

Never in a million years could he have predicted what happened at the utterance of his sentence. Everyone stopped talking, even the children, and stared at him. Another surprise awaited him. He shifted

uncomfortably at the attention he had unwittingly garnered. Surprisingly, it was Mrs. Bennet who broke the silence.

“Well, it is good you have come to your senses and we will talk about this over tea, but first, we must get everyone settled.” She gathered the children and beckoned Miss Lydia to her side. “Lydia, you and Kitty take the children upstairs. Hill will bring your tea up there.”

Darcy barely stopped himself from gasping at the knowledge the two youngest daughters had been relegated back to the nursery. Much had changed since he was here last. Mrs. Bennet continued, “Mary, tell Sarah to bring out the cake and let her know the Gardiner’s have arrived.” While she spoke, the carriage drivers continued on around to the back of the manor. “Edward, Maddie, do you wish to freshen up, or would you like some tea before you go to the guest wing?”

Guest wing? How large was Longbourn?

“A cup of tea would be divine, Fanny and this would give us a chance to get to know Mr. Darcy better – unless you are leaving right away, sir.” Mr. Gardiner looked at him.

“I had not thought... not expected...”

“Of course, you will stay for tea, Mr. Darcy. We are family and cannot let you travel back to London without making sure you have had something to eat.” Mrs. Bennet dared to take him by the arm and lead him into the house.

The woman may be flighty, but she had always been an excellent hostess, so he willingly allowed her to take him inside where the next hour was filled with pleasant conversation and he found he liked the aunt and uncle from London very much. The amiable Mr. Gardiner was as intelligent as Mr. Bennet, evidenced when they began discussing the ongoing conflict over the channel. Darcy could not remember the last time he had relaxed in the company of virtual strangers

and did not feel the need to guard his thoughts and opinions. It was refreshingly welcome.

He quickly learned the family had gathered for their annual Yuletide celebration and experienced a pang of remorse Elizabeth was not here. He realized, belatedly, that he could have asked her to come with him and while he was with her uncle, she could have enjoyed an afternoon with her cousins.

“Darcy, the day is lengthening and soon it will be dark. I would be remiss if I did not offer for you to stay for dinner and spend the evening here.” Bennet said when his wife left the room to see about dinner.

He could see the sense in staying the night but was woefully unprepared without his valet, or a change of clothes.

“I did not come prepared to spend the night,” he started to say.

“Nonsense. My valet can attend you and the maids will freshen up your clothes once you are abed. Even though you have very able

outriders, I would not rest knowing you were on the highway at night.”

“Very well, I will stay. Thank you. Your kindness is welcomed.”

“We are family, son. It is what we do.”

“I will send an express to Elizabeth advising her of my change of plans.”

Bennet grinned at him. “You are learning, Darcy.”

It was only as he boarded his carriage the next morning and drove off that he realized he truly thought of the Bennet’s like family. Even the loud ones.



The afternoon her husband returned from Hertfordshire, Burke informed Elizabeth the master wished to see her in his study. Having just returned from a brisk walk at a nearby park, she handed her outerwear to the footman who had accompanied her, smoothed the errant curls that insisted on escaping her

chignon whenever she wore a bonnet, and made her way to her husband's study.

Darcy stood with one buckskin clad hip resting on the edge of his desk. He glanced up from the note he held in his hand and actually smiled upon her entry making him even more handsome if that were at all possible.

"Mrs. Darcy," he said in greeting and smiled wider, dimples appearing on both cheeks in response.

Her heart did a traitorous flip. No. No. *NO!* She did not wish to find him handsome, or agreeable, or handsome... She wanted him to remain aloof. And miserable. And taciturn. She could remain in control of her emotions if he kept his distance and did not smile at her.

"Mr. Darcy." She clasped her hands in front of her body and did not advance further into the room, remaining poised by the door for a quick exit. "Your journey to Longbourn was met with success?"

"Most assuredly." He pushed off the desk

and came to stand directly in front of her, forcing her to tilt her chin and raise her eyes to his. “First, I must apologize for my egregious behavior. I have no excuse for what I have said, or for what I have done. All I can do is move forward and hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

She blinked slowly, letting the words seep into the marrow of her bones. He asked forgiveness... could she? She lowered her gaze and stared at her feet, giving a small start when he tucked a finger under her chin and raised her face again.

“Second, you are more than handsome and more than tolerable. I was a fool not to have begged an introduction in order to solicit a dance.”

Now, her cheeks heated and she knew she was blushing.

“And third, even before my cousin Richard spoke with Wickham,’ - so that was the task the colonel alluded to when she first met him

– “I was trying desperately to figure out a way I could crawl back into your good graces and find a way to make this marriage work.” His eyes bore into hers. “I do not expect you to fall at my feet, but I would like to know if we could establish, at the very least, a comfortable friendship.”

She took her time to formulate an answer. Never, in her wildest dreams, had she imagined this man would humble himself and apologize.

“I have never desired your good opinion, Mr. Darcy. You were simply the friend of a man my sister fell in love with.” She felt her husband jerk at the confession of Jane’s affection. “However, we are in this journey together and it is better to go forward with our steps aligned rather than expending our energies in one heated exchange after another.”

He took both her hands in his and raised them to his lips, kissing the back of them with

a hint of reverence.

“Thank you, Mrs. Darcy. May I ask for the privilege of calling you by your given name?”

Surprised once again by his gallantry, she blinked in an attempt to marshal her thoughts.

“You may.”

“And, when you are comfortable, I would ask that you call me William.”

“I...,” she began. “I am not yet ready for that, Mr. Darcy. Please understand – ”

“Elizabeth, you rightly hold me in disdain. Not only did you sport a physical bruise, but also hidden ones. I can wait.”

“Thank you.” She gently withdrew her hands and stepped away.

Darcy also stepped back and moved around his desk. He rifled through a sheaf of papers on his desk and pulled out a blue folder. Without saying a word, he handed it to her.

“This is...?”

“The amended marriage settlement. Please

read through and if there is anything you do not like or wish to add. I have no qualms about having a new one written up. In fact, I should have brought this to you before I saw your father – or rather – uncle.”

“My uncle is the only man I have ever known as a father figure. I have but faded memories of my real father.” She flipped open the folder and began to peruse the document, her eyebrows lifting at each new article of payments and annuities. “You have been more than generous, Mr. Darcy.”

“As Mrs. Darcy, you are entitled to everything written there and it was disgraceful what I forced your uncle to sign.” He moved around the desk once more and stood in front of her. “Elizabeth, I regret so many things and if I could do it over...,” he paused and then smiled. “Will you wait here for one moment? I shall be right back.”

He left the room and closed the door. She stood, folder in hand, wondering what in the

world he was up to. Not even five minutes had passed before the door opened again and Burke stood in the door frame. He said, in the most formal voice she'd ever heard, "A gentleman to see you, ma'am."

Wide eyed, she watched Mr. Darcy re-enter the room. Burke and her husband approached.

"Would you be so kind as to introduce us, Mr. Burke?" her husband asked.

"It would be my pleasure. Mrs. Darcy, I present to you Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire." Burke then faced his employer. "Mr. Darcy, may I introduce you to Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy, formerly Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn, Hertfordshire."

"Mrs. Darcy, it is a pleasure to be introduced. I have heard wonderful things about you from so many people." He looked toward his butler. "Thank you, Burke. That will be all."

With a hint of a smile on the butler's

usually austere face, he gave them a polite bow and left the room, closing the door behind him.

“You did not have to do that,” she admonished, even though secretly she was very pleased by this surprise tactic of resetting their relationship.

“Yes, I did. I would very much like to start afresh. Of course, we will always remember what has transpired between us, but given time, the rough edges will smooth and a friendship can emerge. I greatly enjoyed our debates while you were at Netherfield.”

“Debates! I thought of them as arguments.”

“Truly? They were the highlight of my whole stay in Hertfordshire.”

“And I was under the impression you were only looking to find fault.”

“Absolutely not. My mind was more agreeably engaged and the quickness of thought you always displayed kept me on my

toes. I never knew, from one moment to the next if you would agree or challenge. It was exhilarating.”

“Thank you.” She felt her cheeks warming. All those times she thought he was looking at her because he found her disagreeable. She had much to think about when she was in the privacy of her chambers.

“Before we have dinner, might I ask if you enjoy the theater?”

“I do. Whenever I am in London, it is one of the highlights of my visit.”

“Then, may I ask if you would join me next Thursday for *The Taming of The Shrew*?”

She couldn’t help herself, she laughed. “Do you think we dare?”

“If nothing else, it will provide us with new ways to torment each other.”

“Mr. Darcy, I would love nothing better than to attend the theater. It will be most entertaining.”

“I am of a mind to ask if my aunt and

uncle would join us. They could also bring my sister, Georgiana. I would very much like for you to meet her.”

“If you are referring to Lady Matlock, I met her last week, along with your sister.” She hesitated only briefly before telling him the news.

“You did? Where – How in the world?”

“At a tea shop, of all places.”

Burke opened the door to the study.

“Dinner is ready, sir.”

“Thank you.” Darcy crooked his elbow.

“Over dinner, tell me more of your meeting.”

“If you insist, but you may not like what happened.”

Chapter Thirteen

You may not like what happened... it sounded ominous, yet, Elizabeth said it in a playful tone. He was letting his imagination get away from him. *Wait for her to tell you before you judge*, he admonished himself. *You already mucked it up once, do not do it again.* Once the first course was served and they were alone, Darcy asked how she met his aunt Matlock.

“Mrs. Gardiner and I were enjoying our tea after shopping – her husband is the owner of Gardiner Emporium – when an elegant lady and young girl entered the shop. I paid them no mind as they were strangers, but the next set of ladies who entered were none other than Miss Bingley and her sister, Mrs. Hurst.”

Darcy gave no indication that he knew

who Mrs. Gardiner was. He would explain later. Right now, he was curious – no, it was more like he dreaded what was to come next. Knowing Miss Bingley as he did, and having read the horrendous letter she'd written Jane, the outcome would not have been pleasant.

“Miss Bingley, as you can well imagine, began chastising me, claiming I was a fallen woman, which upset the other patrons. The owner came out and asked me to leave.”

“He did what?”

“You must realize, he had no idea who I was and he was quite fearful of losing the patronage of the other lady who could hear every word.”

“Miss Bingley had no right to say such things.”

“I have thought about that. As your close *particular* friend, she would have known we were married, but she remained quite ignorant of the fact.” Elizabeth shot him a hard look and he couldn't look her in the eye.

“This is another area where I have failed you. I did not tell the Bingleys about our marriage. Charles was to have come to dinner prior to our wedding but the rest of his family invited themselves and we did not have the private moment I so desired to let him know.”

“Why could you not tell all of them at the same time?”

“I hesitate to raise your anger, yet again.”

“Mr. Darcy, I am well aware you held me in contempt alongside my family. I do not believe there is anything you could tell me in that regard that will surprise me.”

He laid down his flatware and measured his words. He had promised her honesty.

“When I left Netherfield Park, I hinted quite broadly that I was leaving with no regrets. Bingley deduced I was not going to London by way of Longbourn and I did not correct him in that assumption.”

He stopped talking because the footmen came in and cleared the plates for the second

course. Elizabeth's face had lost all its color, the exception being two deep red spots high on her cheekbones.

“As you can imagine, they did not stay in Hertfordshire and returned to town the very same day as me. My plan, if Charles had come alone, was to tell him we were getting married.”

“And a letter would not have sufficed when you could not find a private moment?”

“He is my closest friend, next to my cousin, Richard. I wanted to talk things over with him. I was unsure of Wickham's involvement in our situation and needed to know what he had heard after we left the ball. I could not take the chance of Miss Bingley overhearing what we discussed.”

“How many times must I say this? I spoke with Mr. Wickham a sum total of two times, and know him only as a casual acquaintance.” She put her napkin on her plate. “I find my appetite has deserted me. If you knew what

Miss Bingley wrote my sister prior to them leaving... she abused Jane so badly.”

“I am aware. Your uncle had Miss Bennet bring the letter down to let me read it.”

“He did?” Surprise etched across her face. “Then you know how vile a missive it was.”

“I am and, trust me, I will have words with Bingley.”

“When you speak with him, do not chastise him for leaving Netherfield Park immediately following you. In that, he did no wrong as he was under the assumption you had abandoned my family to rumor and gossip. That is something your conscience must deal with when you lay your head down at night. The other drippings of nonsense with regard to your sister, you have every right to take Miss Bingley to task – unless of course, what she hinted at broadly was true.”

“None of it is true. I would never have sat idly by while Bingley mooned over your sister if he had an understanding with mine.”

“So, you admit Mr. Bingley showed my cousin more regard than usual.”

“One would have to be blind not to have seen it.”

“I repeatedly assured Jane that Mr. Bingley would pursue her further because my reputation was saved by our marriage. Little did I know that you happily helped him cut those ties.” Elizabeth raised trembling hands to her lips and he could see her eyes well up with tears. “If you only knew how gentle my cousin is. She trusted Mr. Bingley. Felt safe with him.” She pushed away from the table and rose to her feet. “I am sorry. I have lost my appetite and shall retire for the evening.”

She stepped away from her chair and made to leave the room.

“Elizabeth,” he called out and she paused. “You have yet to tell me how you met my aunt and sister.”

“The time for companionship and sharing has ended, Mr. Darcy. I am unwilling to

remain in your company this evening.” She gave him the briefest of curtsies. “Good night.”

And once again, he watched his wife leave the room. It was becoming quite tedious, yet he knew not how to mend their shattered relationship. He signaled the footman to clear the table.

“Please advise Mrs. Davies the meal was perfect, as usual. My wife has fallen with a headache and, as such, has retired to her rooms.”

He strode down the hall to his study, the silence of the house weighing heavy on his shoulders. His sister had abandoned him to Matlock House and his wife did not wish to speak with him and when Charles learned Miss Bennet had indeed loved him... what a mess. All because of his damnable pride.

He sat at his desk and stared at the papers scattered about from when he looked for the settlement. Normally, he enjoyed taking care

of his estate. Writing letters of business was not odious, as Miss Bingley had simpered one fateful night at Netherfield Park. He actually enjoyed writing. Words came easier to him when he could carefully order his thoughts and put them upon the blank page.

He paused.

And a letter would not have sufficed when you could not find a private moment?

For the first time in weeks, a slow smile spread across his face. There might still be a way to connect with his wife. He pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and reached for his quill and inkpot.

Chapter Fourteen

Early the next morning, Elizabeth lay in her bed and stared up at the trayed ceiling of her bedchamber, going over the conversation with her husband at dinner the night previous. His admission that he had willingly let Mr. Bingley think he would not do the honorable thing and offer marriage should not have surprised her. She well knew how angry he had been, yet her heart pinched at the idea of Jane being caught in the crossfire of his contempt toward her family.

“Odious man! And to think I was starting to like him,” she huffed before sitting up and swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

Although it was still too early for Betty to attend her, she noted the scullery maid had already been up and stoked the fire, taking the

chill off the room. She padded over to one of the windows and drew back the curtain, enjoying the peaceful scene of the back garden bathed in the first blush of a winter sunrise.

A few minutes later, she moved away from the window to pull the lanyard to summon her maid, when she noticed a thin strip of light beneath the connecting door to Mr. Darcy's bedchamber. She knew he was an early riser, such as herself, but it was disconcerting to know he was in such close proximity. About to turn away, the sound of something being slid beneath the door caught her interest.

Moving quietly, she approached the door and stooped to pick up the letter. *Elizabeth* was emblazoned across the front of the sealed missive. Even though she could not see him, she stared at the door, envisioning her husband getting ready for the day and leaving her alone in the house, as per usual.

Soon seated by the window, she broke the seal and began reading the letter.

Elizabeth,

Last night you asked quite succinctly why a letter would not suffice. It is too late for me to write to Mr. Bingley, so I am meeting him at my gentlemen's club this morning and shall lay all things before him. If I lose his friendship over this, then it is my own fault. I am hopeful, though, that I am not too late to regain your good opinion. To that end, I must tell you why I lose all reasonable thought when it comes to George Wickham.

Mr. Wickham is the son of a very respectable man, who had for many years the management of all the Pemberley estates. My father esteemed Mr. Wickham's father so much, he willingly allowed his son, George, to be named as his godson. My father had the highest opinion of young Mr. Wickham, hoping the church would be his profession. George Wickham and I are of the same age and I was aware of things my father remained ignorant of his entire life. While at

university, George's licentious behavior had free reign and it was there I began to distance myself from my former friend and childhood playmate.

When my excellent father died, he included in his will a recommendation that if Mr. Wickham took orders, he would make available to him a valuable family living as soon as it became vacant. There was also a legacy of one thousand pounds. Less than half a year passed before Mr. Wickham wrote that he had resolved against taking orders and expected an immediate pecuniary advantage, in lieu of the preferment. He resigned all claim to the living at Kympton and accepted in return three thousand pounds. To be frank, I was relieved. I could not, in good conscience allow him to lead a pig to slaughter let alone a spiritual flock of sheep to eternal salvation.

All connection between us seemed now dissolved. For about three years I heard little of him; but on the death of the incumbent of the

living, he applied again by letter for the presentation. He had the audacity to state that he was now resolved on being ordained and should receive the living in question. Since he had been generously recompensed for the living, as well as his proclivity to practice sin instead of preaching against it, I refused him. How he lived the next two years, I know not, but I discovered, to my everlasting grief, he had been meticulously planning his revenge.

I must now mention a circumstance which I wish to forget myself, and which no obligation less than the present should induce me to unfold to any human being. My sister, whom you said you have met, was taken from school about a year ago and an establishment was formed for her in London. Expecting to enjoy a summer respite, she went with her companion, Mrs. Younge, to Ramsgate. Unbeknownst to us, Mrs. Younge had applied for the job for no other reason than to earn Georgiana's trust and make

way the path for Mr. Wickham to plot a course to her tender heart. I later discovered Mrs. Younge and Wickham had been lovers for well over two years prior to this time.

With her help, he ‘accidentally’ came across them walking the shoreline, and Georgiana, whose affectionate heart retained a strong impression of his kindness to her as a child, was persuaded to believe herself in love and to consent to an elopement. She was then but fifteen. By the grace of God, I joined them unexpectedly a day or two before the intended elopement and thwarted his heinous plan. I have no doubt that Mr. Wickham’s chief object was unquestionably my sister’s fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds; but I cannot help supposing that the hope of revenging himself on me was also a strong inducement. If successful, his revenge would have been complete indeed. I came to Hertfordshire to not only help Bingley learn about running an estate, but to also allow Georgiana a chance to

heal under the tender ministrations of my aunt, Lady Matlock.

Because of my past dealings with this foul reprobate, I was convinced he had managed to induce you to aid him in yet another elaborate plan of deceit and bribery. Mr. Wickham lays his strategies out with great care and you would not have been the first woman he has used in his nefarious plots. It was for these very reasons that my anger obscured any reasonable explanation offered. If the wounds from Georgiana's near escape had not been so raw, I might have behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner. I can only now offer you my humblest of apologies. You could no more do what I accused than the sun to move from the west to the east. You have my respect, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy, and given time, I will show just how much I esteem and admire you.

*Yours, etc.,
F. Darcy*

Elizabeth lowered the letter to rest on her lap. Dastardly Mr. Wickham! Even though the colonel had told her of Wickham frittering away the large sum of money he received in lieu of the living, never would she have thought someone so pleasing in appearance could be so manipulative and evil.

Unexpectedly, she heard Mary in her thoughts, reminding her that even the devil comes disguised as an angel of light, and this particular form of evil had practiced his deception on Miss Darcy. No wonder the poor girl was shy in company. She trusted no one. Lizzy read the letter twice more, the words sinking further into her psyche.

The only fly in her ointment of acceptance was Mr. Bingley. Her temper simmered then began to cool. No one forced the amiable young man to abandon Jane. Mr. Darcy may have hinted strongly he was not going to offer marriage, but Mr. Bingley was his own man and if he could not support Jane in the midst

of a crisis, then he did not love her at all. He should have stood by her side and not abandon her because of what the *ton* would think. With the backing of the master of Netherfield Park, her family may well have survived the scandal without her marriage to the taciturn man from Derbyshire. Mayhap it was a good thing Mr. Bingley had scampered off to London. Who wanted a husband who attributed his happiness to where Mr. Darcy hung his hat at night?

At the sound of her maid entering the room, she placed her husband's letter in the drawer. She had much to think on and seeing as she had no tasks as Mistress of Darcy House and lived as a glorified guest, she had plenty of time on her hands for that endeavor. An hour later as she finished breakfast, Burke entered the room, a silver salver balanced on his palm

“A letter for you, Mrs. Darcy,” he said and held out the elaborate tray. “It is from Matlock

House.”

“Thank you, Burke,” she replied and picked up the letter, admiring the quality of the paper.

“The footman was told to wait for your reply.”

“I am finished eating and will respond directly. If you would be so kind as to make sure he has some refreshments while I read this over and form my response.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Burke left the room with a polite half bow.

She turned the letter over and broke the seal, a smile forming as she read the short missive. As promised, she was to attend tea at Matlock House that afternoon. Elizabeth rose from the table and exited the room and started for the main staircase. She knew Mr. Darcy had pointed out the little room his mother had used as an office, but she was still not confident enough to encroach on what she perceived as hallowed ground in his eyes and

proceeded to her own bedchamber where she quickly penned a positive response before throwing open the armoire doors to look over her dresses.

~ ~ ~

“*En garde!*” Darcy said before lunging at his fencing partner.

“Enough!” Richard called and skillfully danced out of reach of his cousin’s *epee*. “We have been at this for almost two hours. I believe we have earned respite.”

“I will find another partner then.” He cast his gaze about the room in pursuit of a worthy opponent, pausing when his cousin laid a large hand on his forearm.

“If you continue in this madcap behavior, you will injure yourself.” He firmed his grip when Darcy would have pulled his arm away. “That is an order.”

He looked from the hand to his cousin’s face and saw a mixture of worry and anger, as

well as concern. It was only when he nodded in agreement, did Richard loosen his grip.

“Freshen up and we will go to White’s for a talk.”

“I have already been at White’s today.”

“You have?”

“Aye, I met with Bingley.”

“Now we definitely need to talk. I will wait for you at the door.”

“Yes, sir.” Darcy mock saluted him.

“You would have made a good soldier, Darcy. Too bad you are tied to that pile of rocks in Derbyshire.”

“That pile of rocks, in one form or another, has been in the family since the eleventh century. The eldest son has always been anchored to it. But that’s nowt to do wi’ whot yo’ axt me,” he said, slipping into the soft northern cant of Derbyshire.

“I do not believe I asked, I believe I ordered you to come with me to White’s for a drink.” Richard grabbed a linen handkerchief

from one of the small stacks scattered about the room and wiped the sweat from around his neck.

“Aw’ve drunk mony a quart there, but nowt today.”

“It is almost like your stable master is standing before me,” Richard chuckled.

“I spent much time in Mr. McAllister’s company during my formative years.”

“Good man, McAllister. Now, let us be off.”

“Richard, I truly do not want to go to White’s twice in one day.”

“We shall go to Matlock House and delve into pater’s illicit horde of French brandy and then you will tell me what you and Bing-a-bong talked about.”

“I wish you would not call him by that horrid name.”

Richard stopped walking and Darcy nearly plowed into his back.

“*Bingley*” – Richard stressed the name –

“bounces about like a puppy, always in search of a new toy. Bing-a-bong is an apt description.”

“He is attempting to change.”

“Humph...” was all Richard said and stayed silent until they were in the carriage on their way to his family’s *pied-a-terre* in town. It was not until they were safely ensconced in his father’s library, with a full glass of brandy in his hand that he broke his silence. “Why are you avoiding your house?”

Darcy choked on his drink.

“Why do you say that?”

“Fine, have it your way. What did your cook serve for dinner last night?”

“Fish.”

“Which you did not finish. And the night before?”

“It has slipped my memory.”

“For a man who can recall, with startling clarity, every line of poetry or verse from obscure books dating back to the fourteenth

century, if not further, I find it hard to believe you cannot recollect what you ate the night before last. Especially as the hostess was Mrs. Bennet, known for setting a good table. And I am sure, if I pressed, you cannot tell me what was served at your house the past three nights prior to your going to Hertfordshire.”

“What do you want from me, Richard?”

“Word has filtered out that you are married and people are beginning to talk. The vultures wonder why a newly married man avoids his wife. Before you know it, they will begin to whisper you have started visiting that little house you bought near Drury Lane again.”

“It has lain empty since last summer.”

Darcy studied the flames which danced in the fireplace. “How do you know these things?”

“You forget what I do for a living. I stay alive by being aware of what is going on around me.”

“Aye, you do have a sixth sense when it

comes to trouble. Too bad you were on the Continent when Wickham was sniffing around my sister's skirts."

"Water under the bridge. As we speak, he is most likely hanging over the side of a ship, puking his guts out. Crossing the Atlantic in winter is not fun."

"Rough seas?"

"Very rough."

"Excellent." Darcy smiled against the edge of his cut glass tumbler before taking a deep swallow. "At least one good thing has happened this past month."

"I would say two good things. You keep forgetting that you have a delightful wife, one whom you have been assiduously avoiding."

"She is most desirous of me not attending her."

"Can you blame her? You have treated her and her family most abominably."

"She accused me of separating her sister from Bingley."

“You may not have said the words, but you most definitely made sure he did not hold them with any regard when you left Meryton.” Richard took a sip of his drink. “Even during my short stay at Longbourn, I heard how the whole lot of them fled to town, hot on your heels, without a word of farewell.”

“Oh, there were words given, in the form of a poison pen letter by Miss Bingley to Miss Bennet. Her uncle had me read it when I was there to have the new settlement signed.”

“Bennet mentioned the letter but I did not read it.”

“Ahh... finally. Something of which you have no first-hand knowledge. I shall have to mark this day on my calendar.”

“I knew it was harsh, but I would like to know what the orange shrew wrote.”

“I cannot repeat verbatim, but suffice to say, she told Miss Bennet she would consign all correspondence from her to the fire and cut her direct if seen. She then broadly hinted –

no, that is too soft – she bragged of an anticipated alliance between Bingley and Georgiana and that both sides of the family were all in favor.”

“The bitch!”

“Aye. I told Elizabeth I would speak with Bingley this morning and tell him the truth of the matter. We discussed other things – private things,” he said, lowering his brow toward his cousin in warning. “I will apprise her of our conversation when I see her tonight.”

“No need, you will see her in a few minutes.”

“We are going to my house?”

“No, she is here as we speak.”

“Here!”

“Yes, having tea with the mater.”

“Why was I not told?”

“If you had broken your fast with your wife this morning, you would have been there when Mother sent a note. Instead, you hared

off to White's to placate your pet puppy."

"Why do you hate Bingley?"

"Because he refuses to grow up. He allows his younger sister to lead him about by the nose and lives off the largesse of his brother by marriage, or you, when in Town. This vacation he took to Meryton taught him nothing but how to throw a ball and leave a lovely young woman behind, facing gossip and derision of the most acute kind."

"He gave her no promises."

"No? Did he not say he was throwing the ball in her honor?" Richard did not wait for an answer before moving on. "Did he not dance the second set with her? And even though they did not dance the promised supper set because the whole family decamped to Longbourn after your tryst on the terrace, he had also claimed the final set." Richard set down his now empty glass. "Let me ask you something. If he had danced with a lady three times at one of these fancy balls we attend

here in town, what would be the general consensus?”

“They may as well have posted the banns.”

“Yet, he ran off to London because he thought his friend was not doing the honorable thing. The promise was implied.” Richard leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin. “Funny thing, society. The Bingley’s firmly believe you have not behaved in an honorable manner and still wish to curry your favor. Because of that, they left the Bennet family to navigate what they knew would have been a sea of vicious rumors and innuendo.” He straightened. “No, I cannot like him, or his ungrateful shrew of a sister.”

“Richard, I cannot change what has happened. I can only move forward.”

“Hiding from your wife will not solve your problems.”

“I am giving her space.”

“Woo your wife, Darcy. She does not

require space; she requires your presence so that she may come to know you.”

“When you begin to sound like one of Byron’s poems, I know our conversation has come to an end.”

“You know I am right, and we begin your campaign now.”

Richard stood and straightened his jacket, Darcy followed after putting down his almost full glass.

“Now?” he asked.

“We join the ladies for tea.”

~ ~ ~

Darcy and Richard paused before entering the drawing room. He heard the ladies chattering in a lively fashion but did not understand a word. He glanced at Richard and noticed him smiling. At his questioning glance, Richard said in a low voice. “Your wife just told mother’s guest they should continue conversing in English so as not to be thought

rude.”

“You understood what Elizabeth said?”

“I spent some time in Spain under Wellington. I learned enough to get by while there” At Darcy’s still bewildered expression he asked, “Have you forgotten your wife’s mother was Spanish?”

He had but felt compelled to defend himself. “Of course not! Do not be daft.”

He made to enter the room and the footman took hold of the door handle. Both paused when Richard cleared his throat.

“Did I tell you her grandfather was nobility? A distant cousin to the King of Spain?”

“Mr. Bennet made me aware of her connections, something you conveniently did not share. Anything else I should know before we join your mother?”

“Well,” Richard looked a bit sheepish. “From what I have heard so far, the lady they are entertaining is the Spanish ambassador’s

wife and she has just told your wife they expect the King to be pleased with the marriage. Her husband sent a letter as soon as he received her note.”

Darcy processed this information in silence before Richard nodded at the footman to open the door. He did his best to smooth his expression and thought he was successful until his cousin elbowed him in the ribs.

“Stop scowling.”

“I am not scowling.”

“Forgive me, but the lines on your forehead and the downturn of your lips must have confused me for a moment.”

“Was I truly scowling?”

“Darcy.” Richard paused as though marshaling his thoughts. “In order to have a happy marriage, I would suggest you stand in front of a reflective glass for at least an hour every morning and study your face. You have the fiercest expression right now and will never earn your lady’s love.”

At the end of his speech, Richard let the footman finally open the door and they both entered and approached Lady Matlock first, each giving her a kiss on the cheek then turned to the ambassador's wife.

“May I introduce my second eldest son and also my nephew, husband of the delightful Elizabeth?”

“Please do.” A woman, not much older than himself, turned an expectant gaze upon the two gentlemen and his aunt made the necessary introductions.

“Your grace, this is my son, the Honorable Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.” Richard gave a low bow. “And this is Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire.”

Darcy also gave a low, respectful bow.

“Gentlemen, I present to you her grace, the Duchess of Albuquerque. Her husband, the Duke of Albuquerque is the Spanish Ambassador to the court of St. James.”

“I am well pleased to meet the husband of

our monarch's cousin." She smiled at Darcy. "I believe she is also a cousin of *mi esposo*."

"The cousin in Barcelona, my grandfather's heir, would have that information," Elizabeth said. "Before grandfather died, he wrote about his heir's passion for genealogy and continuity. With all the strife that has beset Spain these past few years, I can see why his interest remains focused."

"True, *mi esposo* does not sleep well at night. He worries about *familia* back home."

"I shall add my prayers to his," Elizabeth said and reached over to take the duchess's hand in hers, gave it a squeeze, and then sat back in her chair.

Darcy turned to Elizabeth, noting her ease and familiarity with the duchess, and took the seat next to her hoping no one noticed that he did not give his wife an intimate greeting like he did his aunt, although he did say warmly with what he hoped was a smile, "Good

afternoon, Elizabeth.”

“Mr. Darcy,” was her soft reply.

“I wondered how long the both of you would stand outside the door,” Aunt Lucinda teased with a twinkle in her eye. “Her grace thought I may have banned gentlemen from joining my afternoon teas.”

“Oh, no! Contessa Matlock,” the ambassador’s wife said. “I was pleasantly engaged with Senora Darcy and must beg forgiveness for claiming so much of her attention. As always, it is such a delight to visit with her. We did not get to see her this past summer and I missed my little English cousin’s pert opinions. To speak with someone in my native language is such a treat. Forgive me, *por favor*.”

“Madam, there is nothing to forgive. Both of you are far too polite to have continued much longer. I am very glad his grace had a meeting with Lord Matlock and you joined him. I do believe Fate intervened in a most

fortuitous manner.”

The duchess said something to Elizabeth and she replied fluently in Spanish. The duchess’s eyes widened and she laughed. His wife’s cheeks turned a rosy hue when she realized everyone else in the room and stopped talking to watch them.

“Forgive me,” Elizabeth said.

“Do not be angry with dear *Elisabeta*, I was naughty in telling her she had a very handsome husband. It explains her reluctance to travel with us to Spain this summer.” The duchess slid a sly glance at Darcy. “She did not disagree.”

Surprised on two fronts, Darcy openly stared at her. First, he was a little taken aback that Elizabeth had previous plans to sail to Spain, and second, he was surprised his wife would acknowledge him in such a favorable manner.

“Close your mouth, cousin,” Richard murmured from the chair next to him. “You

are catching flies.”

“That is something my uncle Bennet always says!” exclaimed Elizabeth, showing a small measure of relief now that the attention had turned from her.

“I am aware. Your cousin Lydia heard those very same words from him when I was at Longbourn.”

“You were in Meryton, Richard?” Aunt Lucinda lowered her teacup onto its matching saucer, held in her hands. “Whatever for?”

Given the dark look she gave both her son and nephew, Darcy knew she was not pleased with the information.

“I had to see the commanding officer of the ___shire Militia about one of his officers. They happen to be quartered in Meryton and whilst there, I took the opportunity to meet our newest family members.”

“I see, and was the report favorable?”

“Pardon me? I did not go to check out the Bennet family.”

“I am sure you did not because if you had, I would be most displeased.” She smiled serenely at her second son. Darcy knew that look. Mother and son would be having a long conversation after everyone left.

“Colonel,” Elizabeth interjected. “How is my family?”

“They are well, Mrs. Darcy. I am sure they will tell you all about my visit when they next write.”

A thread of unease stitched across Darcy’s skin. He did not like where the conversation was headed.

“I am not allowed – ”

“What my wife is trying to say – ” Darcy rudely overrode his wife – “is they will tell her in person when they come to town.”

He had a hard enough row to hoe trying to win her favor and did not need his aunt to learn about his egregious behavior immediately following the compromise. Dear Lord in Heaven, he’d never survive the anger

of Lady Matlock.

“My family is coming to visit?”

“Yes, we only have to arrive at a mutually acceptable date.”

“Hmmm....,” was all his wife said.

Yes, hmmm... indeed. Darcy deftly turned the conversation by asking his aunt where Georgiana was, only to be told she was currently upstairs with her music master and would join them later.

Chapter Fifteen

“No need to worry about changing for dinner, my dear. It will be an informal family one and what you have on is lovely.”

Afternoon tea had stretched into an invitation to dine at Matlock House and his wife had hesitated, stating she and her husband were not properly attired for dinner. “I must get the name of the modiste Mrs. Gardiner recommended to you. Indeed, she is quite talented.”

Darcy took a closer look at his wife and noted that Elizabeth did look lovely, and the dress she wore suited her to perfection.

“Mrs. Gardiner did not recommend this modiste, Lady...,” she stumbled at the stern look from his aunt and then recovered nicely, “... Aunt Lucinda. Mrs. Henshaw is one of

Meryton's own. She does a brisk business, a fair amount coming from the Bennet family, what with five girls to outfit each season."

"Five girls, out at once! Your father must have been driven to distraction."

"My uncle is intimately acquainted with his library."

"Oh ho! – he hides, does he?" Lord Matlock joined the conversation.

"In all fairness, he cannot abide discussion of lace and fripperies, so no one chastises him when he removes himself to the library or his study. As a landowner of some distinction in our little corner of the world, he is quite busy looking after the estate of Longbourn."

Lord Matlock leaned forward. "I hear your family seat is entailed away from the female line."

"Yes, sir, it is." Elizabeth turned her attention to her uncle by marriage. Darcy noted she did not extend to him the same familiarity she had with his aunt. "However,

my uncle Bennet has been diligent in making sure his wife and daughters are well taken care of in the event of his passing before all his daughters are wed.”

“That is good. Yes, very good. Damned nuisance, those entailments. I can see it for a titled family ensuring the family seat is not lost to fools who gamble or drink their lives away, but why a small estate in the country?”

“I know not all the particulars and most of what has been said in polite company is that Grandfather Bennet was extremely angry with his daughter, my aunt Sarah, who married Mr. Samuel Collins. He wished to ensure Longbourn did not get into the hands of his son-in-law. At the time he had two sons, my father and Uncle Thomas, and of course, everyone expects a new bride to bring forth a son...” She gave an elegant shrug of her shoulders. “Aunt Francis had only girls. The rest is sad history.”

“Elizabeth,” Darcy brought her attention

to him and his heart stopped beating for two seconds when her gaze lit upon him. She was so beautiful. When her expression turned quizzical, he realized he had forgotten to ask his question, content to sit and stare at her like a love-sick dolt. Which he was, to be completely honest. Her one brow arched and she waited. *Grab hold of yourself man!*

“Elizabeth,” he repeated, knowing he sounded like some fool a comedic troupe had misplaced, “if the entailment is to follow the male line of Longbourn, it might not go to Mr. Collins at all. It sounds like your uncle’s estate should go the first-born son of your eldest cousin Jane – if she marries and has a son.”

“I am sure Uncle Phillips has searched all avenues.”

“Please do not think this as condescension speaking, but your uncle in Meryton is a country solicitor and very likely has never had to deal with the breaking of an entailment. I will write to your uncle Bennet and ask if he

would mind my solicitors, Kemper and Bedway, looking over the documents. If successful, your family may not lose their home.”

“I... I thank you, Mr. Darcy,” she murmured and he ignored the amused look his cousin Edmund, Viscount Ashton, sported at Elizabeth not calling him by his given name, knowing progress with his wife was a day-by-day campaign. One of which he had no intention of losing.

“You must have been pleased to see a familiar face during your visit with Aunt Lucinda.” Darcy alluded to the Spanish ambassador and his wife.

“I was pleasantly surprised. I had not intended to visit Hertford House until next week in order to inform them I would not travel to Spain with them this summer.”

He felt a moment of disquiet at the thought of how Elizabeth could have literally sailed out of his life if the compromise had not

occurred. He might never have seen her again. Some lusty Spaniard would have snatched her up faster than a child braving the flames of Snapdragon at Christmas.

“I, for one, was very glad their visit coincided with Elizabeth’s,” Aunt Lucinda said. “I know Robert has had many conversations with the ambassador about that French upstart on the Spanish throne.”

“The ambassador came to discuss not only the ongoing conflict in Spain but to also congratulate us on having Elizabeth join the family.”

“How in the world would he know you are Mr. Darcy’s relations?” Elizabeth asked.

“Upon receipt of your letter, he looked to see who Darcy was and discovered he is our nephew. Because we are friends with him and his wife, he sought to welcome us to the family. Do not be surprised if Prinny also sends a letter of congratulations. Regardless, your cousin is a warm and engaging young

man. It is too bad his health continues to decline.”

“He has always had a weak heart. I have also seen a marked change in his features and worry about him and Sophia.”

“Sophia?” Darcy asked.

“His wife.”

“Ah...” Yet another reminder of how intimately acquainted she was with the nobility of Spain.

“His grace also expressed regret of your not joining them as planned when they return to Spain in June.”

“Things change,” Elizabeth said. “My cousin, Mary, would be quick to quote from the Holy Bible of how a man’s heart may devise his way but the Lord directs his steps. It seems He had other plans for my life, which brings me here,” she finished with a small smile directed at her new family members.

“I, for one, am glad those plans changed,” Lady Matlock said, her warm gaze falling on

her newest niece. "You may have been unexpected, but are no less welcomed."

Loud voices were heard in the foyer.

"The harlot is here? Has my whole family gone mad? This is not to be borne!" The door to the dining room flew open, crashing into the wall, and Lady Catherine stormed into the room. "I demand you make this whore leave your house immediately!"

By this time Lord Matlock had risen to his feet and never, in his entire life, had Darcy ever seen him so angry.

"Carlisle, remove this woman from my sight," he bellowed to the beleaguered butler who trailed in the wake of Aunt Catherine's fury. "Take her to her rooms, and lock the door."

"You will not send me to my rooms like a recalcitrant child!"

"When you behave like one, *Cathy*, you will be treated like one. Leave." She did not move. "Now!" he practically yelled and made

to come around the table toward her.

“I am seriously displeased. You have not heard the last from me.” She turned her venomous gaze toward Elizabeth. “I will see you removed from this family if it is the last thing I do. My Anne will not be set aside by a country upstart.”

“Enough,” Darcy said, rising to his feet. “I have had enough of your histrionics to last a lifetime, Aunt Catherine. I am married to Elizabeth. I love Elizabeth,” – he heard a small gasp come from his wife – “I will grow old and have children with Elizabeth and there is nothing you can do about it. I will never, ever marry Anne. She knows this and would tell you if asked.”

“You are a fool, Fitzwilliam Darcy, much like your father,” she hissed. “What connections does this tart have? Anne would be the making of you.”

“I advise you to stop declaring my wife as a woman of loose morals. Mrs. Whittaker has

the bedsheets that defy your claim.”

Aunt Catherine turned an interesting shade of puce and, once again, his wife caught her breath. He dared not turn his attention toward her. He abhorred every kind of deceit but for Elizabeth, he’d walk the path to hell and back to defend her honor.

“I am so glad you mentioned family relations, Catherine,” Aunt Lucinda spoke into the pall of silence. “Did you know our Elizabeth is a cousin to the King of Spain as well as the Duke of Albuquerque?”

“The duke of where?”

“The Spanish ambassador to St James’s court. Elizabeth is their cousin. Is that not a lovely family connection to have?”

“She has bamboozled you. This Jezebel is the second eldest daughter of a country squire with no money, no connections, and an estate that is entailed away to *my* parson.”

“Her uncle, Thomas Bennet, is a country squire. Her father, James Bennet, married a

woman of Spanish nobility. You have no footing here, Catherine. Go to your room and leave for Kent at first light.”

“Very well,” she said as she pivoted to leave. “I know what needs to be done.”

Her walking stick banged on the marble floor, receding in loudness as she made her way up the main staircase to the family wing. Uncle Robert and Darcy resumed their seats and silence gathered around them like an oppressive fog.

“I learned a new piece of music today,” Georgiana offered, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“Bless you, Georgiana,” Aunt Matlock said with a tender smile. “I would love to hear you play after supper if you are willing.”

“I am not proficient enough with this song for company, but I would gladly play something else when we repair to the drawing room.”

“On that note, shall we end the meal and

let the gentlemen enjoy their port?”

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As soon as the gentlemen were left on their own, Uncle Robert informed his butler that no expresses, letters, notes, not one scrap of paper were to leave his house if it had been touched by his sister. Carlisle murmured his approval and bowed out of the room.

Richard poured each man a generous portion of port and handed them around, leaving Darcy to the last.

“What part of wooing your wife did you not understand?”

Darcy brought the glass to his lips but did not take a drink. “You always did cut to the chase.”

“Given the stunned look on your wife’s face, I think it is safe to assume you have never told her that you loved her.”

“No.” He raised his gaze to see his cousin grinning at him and almost groaned with

mortification. “I knew I ardently admired her but was unaware that it had morphed into love until I stood up to Aunt Catherine.”

Now Richard laughed outright, joined by Uncle Robert.

“You are lost, my boy. This reminds me of your father when he first met Anne. How the sparks flew. She was absolutely determined not to marry him, which made Cathy ecstatic. She always had her eye on the prize of Pemberley, but George was determined. If he did not marry Anne, then he would marry no one. Drove Cathy wild and infuriated Anne.”

“Mother did not want to marry father?”

“You, Fitzwilliam, are the image of George Darcy not only in looks but also in character. Your father, in his quest to win Anne’s hand, elucidated the numerous reasons she was an excellent choice of wife. Good breeding, good blood, good dowry, I am sure you can picture in your mind your father waxing eloquent on the benefits of marriage to my youngest

sister.”

“Those are all good reasons to pursue a woman.”

“Are you daft, man?” Richard spluttered and looked toward the earl. “I do not know why you even try, father. He just does not understand.”

“Darcy,” Uncle Robert continued, “Not once did your father speak of the love he felt for Anne. In her anger, she told him to attend Tattersalls and purchase the best mare he could find. One of good breeding and good blood. As a wedding gift to him and his unnamed horse, she would give him five thousand pounds in lieu of a dowry. She told him,” – uncle began to laugh so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes – “she told him she hoped he and the horse would be very happy.”

That would explain the cryptic remark made by his father whenever his parents had one of their rare disagreements. *‘I am off to ride my well-dowered horse from Tattersalls.’*

Knowing their history, it made the comment more poignant.

“She obviously said yes. I am proof of her change of heart.”

“Her heart never changed. She loved your father deeply, but he placed more importance on tangible things rather than intangible ones. He loved her as the daughter of an earl, but he did not value her as a person. He had to learn that family was more than where you laid your head at night, it was who laid beside you that counted. He spent six lonely months alone in Derbyshire before he mounted the horse he’d bought from Tattersalls in a fit of anger, and made his way to Matlock.”

“Was it a well-bred horse?”

All the men began to laugh at Richard’s quip.

“We have to stop,” uncle cried out, holding his sides. “I can scarcely breathe.”

“I was only five at the time,” Ashton said, “but I remember Uncle George coming to

Matlock with a magnificent looking horse. The only reason it stuck with me was because Aunt Anne was standing at the window and I remember her cursing. She never cursed.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, *I cannot believe he bought the damned horse.*”

Uncle Robert guffawed once more and slapped his thigh. “It was more than a magnificent looking horse; it was one of the finest stallions ever bred by Tattersalls. As he dismounted, Anne stood on the stairs in front of the house. With the reins in his hand, your father swept a low courtier’s bow and said, ‘*Woman, I have bought a horse as you suggested.*’”

“I am sure she was pleased. Mother was an excellent horsewoman.”

“Oh no, Darcy. You do not know the whole story. She said he must have hit his head as he bought a stallion by mistake. He replied he had made no mistake and bought

the horse for breeding purposes. He then asked if she had a suitable mare.”

Darcy knew his mouth had dropped open at the brazen insult his father had delivered to his mother.

“I know you are shocked but you may not remember that your mother had a fine sense of humor and without saying a word, she took hold of the reins and led the stallion to the paddocks. As you know, Pemberley has some of the finest stock of horses and this is the genesis of all that.”

“Did he not tell her he loved her?”

“That remained private between your parents, Darcy, but know this. They were quite passionate about each other and although they never said the words out loud when in public, every move, every look between them was permeated with love. He could not have won her hand any other way. The stallion was the impetus for getting them to converse again.”

“Does your wife ride? She may appreciate

a fine horse from Tattersalls.”

Darcy glared at Richard, who was having too much fun at his expense.

“She does not, she prefers to walk.”

“Then, be glad you led the charge with words of love. Mounting and riding will hopefully follow soon.”

“I would ask that you refrain from making such ribald remarks in reference to my wife.”

“Darcy, be grateful you can kick off your boots and loosen your cravat with family. Nothing we say will leave these four walls. All of us want you to have a happy marriage with Elizabeth.”

Talk among the men then turned to the war with France. Uncle Matlock had more information about the ongoing conflict in Spain, thanks to his conversation that afternoon with the ambassador, and Richard added his perspective as he had spent considerable time there with Wellington. It was as Darcy was about to follow his cousins

to the drawing room where the ladies were being entertained by Georgiana, his uncle pulled him aside.

“Nephew, I am well aware of the less-than-ideal conditions of the beginning of your marriage, but let me congratulate you on securing the hand of Elizabeth. If she had been introduced to society, as was her right given who her mother and grandfather were, you may have had to fight off a few hopeful lords and even quite possibly a royal son, or two.”

“Thank you, Uncle Robert. Even before I knew of Elizabeth’s heritage, I was extremely grateful to have her in my life. I was not keen at first because I thought she had conspired with Wickham.”

“You now know that is not true.”

“Aye, and even before that knowledge, I was trying to find a way for us to move forward. She has held my heart for quite some time, although she was unaware until tonight.”

“That was magnificent.” Uncle Robert chuckled. “I have never seen Cathy so flummoxed other than the night your mother announced her engagement at a family dinner. Ensure that Mrs. Whittaker guards the bed linens as if they were the Crown jewels. There is no telling what my sister might attempt.” Uncle waved his hand. “Come, we must join the ladies. If I know my wife, she is planning a strategy to countermand any of my sister’s harebrained ideas. You will not want to miss this. She should be leading our armies. We would never lose a battle if she did.”

The two of them made their way to the drawing room and upon his entry, Darcy noted that Elizabeth had been watching for him. Her cheeks flushed slightly before she turned her attention back to Aunt Lucinda.

“...so, tomorrow we shall attend Madame Etienne’s.” Aunt Lucinda held up her hand when Elizabeth’s mouth opened slightly to challenge. “No, my dear. This time you will

attend a modiste the *ton* is familiar with. You do not need to commission a whole wardrobe, but you must have something substantial made. Oh! – she gasped – your court gown. You need a gown for your presentation. That will be perfect.”

“I had not planned on being presented, Aunt Lucinda.”

“Stuff and nonsense. This is something you can not avoid. At least, not any longer. Now, we will all attend the theater next Thursday and even though you are technically newlyweds, you must ride in Hyde Park at least twice a week.”

“I do not ride.”

“Not at all?”

“No, ma’am. Not at all.”

“Then, you shall take an open carriage.”

“Aunt! It is the middle of winter. We would freeze in an open carriage.” Darcy interceded on his wife’s behalf.

“Oh, horse feathers! Fine. If the weather

permits, walk the promenade for at least a half hour. That will make the harpies happy and Elizabeth happy, as I have heard she is a great walker.”

“We will *not* walk the promenade in the middle of winter; however, we could attend some public functions. Elizabeth and I have already discussed a play, one of the bard’s comedies as my wife dearly loves to laugh, and maybe an opera, but only if she is amenable to the suggestion.”

By this time, he had come by her side and she looked up at him with a warm smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I am amenable to the play we agreed upon the other night and I am open to any opera you recommend.”

“Which play was that?” Aunt Lucinda asked.

“*The Taming of the Shrew*,” Darcy said, sending a conspiratorial grin in the direction of his wife and was rewarded by a soft smile.

“How apt, given why we are upping the

timeline of your introduction to society.” His aunt began laying out her strategy. “In order to counter whatever offensive Catherine may attempt to mount, you will have no choice but to join me the next few weeks for visiting hours and to return visits. We shall start with Lady Jersey and secure your voucher to Almack’s.” Aunt Lucinda looked at Darcy. “Tomorrow, I will send notice to the Lord Chamberlain that I am sponsoring Elizabeth and to add her name to the court list for presentation, April 30. It will be a busy day as this is the first time in over two years the Queen has agreed to host them. Fortunately, as Elizabeth is a minor Spanish royal, she will take precedence and we might not have to wait that long. It would be such a pleasure to avoid the congestion of carriages sure to fill the streets.” She gave Elizabeth a large smile. “And it will drive the denizens of the *ton* crazy with a need to know who you are. If you are not declared this season’s Incomparable, I will

eat my hat.”

She then outlined a timetable of two months, including Elizabeth learning to walk, curtsy, and bow elegantly whilst walking backward with a ridiculously long train during her court presentation. “Trust me on this, darling girl. You will want to be proficient. The gown is cumbersome, wider than a church door, and almost impossible to sit in the carriage without the hoops flying up and hitting you in the face. You will thank me later.”

Darcy’s uncle inclined his head toward his wife with raised brows as if to say, ‘*did I not tell you?*’ and he smiled in spite of himself. Indeed, the war would be over if left to the women.

Chapter Sixteen

“Elizabeth, may I escort you home this evening?”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Darcy.”

“Please, do not think me rude, but I wish to have a word with my sister before we take our leave.”

“I am at my leisure, Mr. Darcy, and will continue to enjoy the company of your lady aunt.”

“Thank you.”

He stood, took her hand, and bowed low over it, placing a warm kiss on the back of her fingers. He was rewarded by her cheeks turning a rosy hue and the lowering of her lashes to hide her eyes. After a quick squeeze, he released her hand and turned to approach Georgiana, who had watched with wide eyes.

“Georgiana,” he began, “might I have a word with you before Elizabeth and I leave for the evening?”

“You may,” she said and rose to her feet with natural grace. Somewhere, somehow his little sister had grown up. Once again, he marveled at how much she reminded him of their mother. She followed him to uncle’s study and took a seat. He paused only long enough to marshal his thoughts, then sat across from her.

“First, I apologize for what occurred when the Bingleys came to dinner after my return from Hertfordshire. My behavior was atrocious and you were well within your right to call me out over what I said, and what I did.”

“Brother, I love you so very much, and to hear those horrible insults you said while at Netherfield with the Bingley’s shocked me to the core of my being. You are better than that.”

“No, my dear, I obviously am not. I did

much worse than spout stuff and nonsense, but that is not why I asked you here. I should have told you as soon as I came back from Meryton I was getting married. I have made many mistakes, and like compound interest on my investments, they have multiplied at a rapid pace.”

“Then tell me how it got out of control.”

“As you well know from my letters, I held Elizabeth in high regard, but had no intention of following it further as her family was well below us with regard to money and connections.”

“But...”

“I did not say my judgment was correct, only that is how I saw it whilst there. Regardless of my concern over the vulgar behavior of her family, Elizabeth intrigued me and at Bingley’s ball, I asked her to dance. After our set, I saw her go outside and worried she would become chilled. When I approached her on the terrace, I thought I saw Wickham

sneaking behind some bushes.”

“Mr. Wickham is in Meryton?”

“He was and I erroneously thought Elizabeth was working with him for monetary gain. When she tripped and fell into my arms, tearing her gown, I automatically assumed she had done so on purpose.” At Georgiana’s gasp, he leaned forward and patted her hand. “She did not. It was an accident, but because of my anger I swore to make her rue the day she collaborated with Wickham.”

“Oh, my.” Georgiana’s eyes welled up with tears. “You were so hateful and the way Miss Bingley gloated over Miss Elizabeth’s fall from grace was horrid. Her true nature was revealed in full that night. I am also disappointed in Mr. Bingley. If he had truly thought well of Elizabeth’s cousin, he should have stayed and supported her, regardless of what action you did or did not take.”

“I agree, Georgi,” calling her by her favorite shortened name. “As everyone in the

family now knows, I love Elizabeth and must find a way to make amends. To that end, I would ask if you mind staying with aunt and uncle for a few more weeks.”

“I do not mind in the least.” She gave him a coy smile. “Are you going to woo her by taking her to the theater?”

“Yes, you little minx. I am going to woo her and it is none of your business how I go about doing so.”

“Fine. I will just ask Richard.”

“Ask away. Even he will not know.”

Georgiana looked at him from beneath her eyelashes. “He will know. He always does.”

She was right. Richard always seemed to know.

“Let us join my bride so I may take her home at a decent hour.”

They returned to the drawing room and within the half hour, he and Elizabeth were tucked up snug and warm in one of his carriages heading for Darcy House but not

before they had both promised to attend the theater next week as his uncle's guest. After they disembarked from the carriage, before they'd reached the front entrance, he asked Elizabeth if she would join him for a nightcap before retiring for the evening. She said yes and met him in the library as soon as she had changed her outer footwear for house slippers.

"My aunt is quite taken with you," he said as he handed her a glass of wine."

"At first, she had no choice but to come to my defense as Miss Bingley declared, in a loud voice, that I was the trollop Mr. Darcy had refused to marry after a failed compromise."

"Miss Bingley said that? In public?"

"Oh, yes. In the only way she knows how. Loudly."

He shuddered. So many things had gone wrong since that night at Netherfield. Would it ever end? He gave a start when Elizabeth laid her hand on his forearm. "She did not harm me, Mr. Darcy. I am inured to her waspish

tongue and tart manners. Even if we had not married, she could never touch my heart and soul. I refuse to give her that power.”

“You are a strong woman. I should have seen it sooner. I believe I inherently knew it, which is why I was so drawn to you.” He held her gaze for a long moment, then broke the tension by saying, “My aunt came to your defense?”

“She did. Miss Bingley obviously had no idea your aunt was in the tea shop, hidden as she and Miss Darcy were by a pillar, but when Caroline invoked the name of Darcy as well as the Earl of Matlock, she had no choice but to stem the tide of gossip.” She smiled at the memory. “I like your aunt very much.”

“She is formidable and will be your greatest ally.”

“Are you not my greatest ally?”

“Of course,” he stammered. “It’s just... when it comes to the *ton*...”

“Mr. Darcy, I am but teasing. I know she is

a formidable ally and am grateful she has decided I am worth the effort.”

“You are more than worth the effort. I thought that before I even learned of your family history. I have not shown it, but I decidedly thought about it.”

“As we have only started to make amends, let us agree that you are trying to behave in a more gentlemanlike manner and I commend you. I am so glad you spoke with your sister this evening. Will she be staying at Matlock House for the next while?”

“Yes, I asked for a few weeks for us to gain ground in our friendship and she was more than willing to afford us some privacy. She is also well disposed to like you.”

“Wonderful.” She took a sip of wine. “Are there other topics you wish to canvas before we bid each other good night? Laundering issues, mayhap?”

He knew, by the heat on his cheeks, they had likely flushed a dark red.

“I apologize for what I inferred about bed linens to Aunt Catherine. It was not gentlemanly.”

“I...” She also flushed and her lashes fluttered down to sweep the top of her rosy cheeks. “I am sure you had your reasons.”

“I could not allow her to keep hinting that you were not a maiden when you came to this marriage. It is the very least that I could do.”

“I appreciate the sentiment and given time, I may be able to look your uncle and his sons in the eye.”

“Elizabeth, they are your staunchest supporters. Even Ashton, the reprobate likes you, and the viscount does not like anybody these days.”

“Then, I am honored.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, enjoying their wine.

“As you know, I spoke with Bingley the other morning. I obviously told him we had married and apologized for not telling him

that was my intention from the start. If I had, he might not have left Hertfordshire so precipitously and Miss Bingley would not have accosted you so grievously. In fact, I should tell him of her behavior.”

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why would you worry about what Miss Bingley says or does. She is not your sister. She is not even remotely related to you, so why is it your duty to tell Bingley of her outrageous conduct in public?”

“Because he should be made aware of how she insulted you.”

“And do you not think all the other times she insulted me and my family, in your company I might add, while in Hertfordshire was not a large enough clue to her true nature?” She placed her nearly empty wine glass down onto the side table and heaved a heavy sigh. “You are not Mr. Bingley’s keeper. He makes his own decisions and has to learn

to abide by them. I thank you that you took the time to advise him of our marriage and will gladly host him for dinner any time you choose. However, if you spoke with him over a misguided attempt to steer him in the direction of my cousin, please stop. She deserves better than a man who would abandon her over a matter which did not affect his family in any way shape or form, other than their desire to stay within the parameters of your friendship and social circle.”

“He intimated that he might return to Netherfield after Twelfth Night.”

“Mr. Bingley may go wherever he chooses. Jane will not be at Longbourn, she will be in London, at her aunt and uncle’s house.” She dared to look at him directly. “The ones who live near Cheapside.”

He held her gaze for almost a minute complete before saying, “I must get their direction from you. When your cousin is here,

we will have them for dinner.”

“You also said my family would be coming to town.”

“Ah... yes. I have yet to write them, but I will welcome your family any time in the new year and we can visit Vauxhall Gardens and maybe tempt your uncle to an afternoon of shopping at Hatchard’s”

“Well played, Mr. Darcy. You have already discovered the way to my uncle’s heart.” She rose to her feet and Darcy followed suit.

“While we are making nice, may I request permission to attend Miss Lucas’s wedding in Meryton?”

“What is the date?”

“The tenth of January.”

“I see no reason, other than intemperate weather, for you not to attend.”

“And would you come with me, or shall I go alone?”

“Do you wish for me to attend?”

“Yes, I would.”

He could do this. He could bear Mrs. Bennet and her two youngest daughters for a few short days if it made Elizabeth happy.

“Have you no desire to know who Miss Lucas is marrying?”

“I am sure he is a gentleman with refined tastes. Miss Lucas, if I recall correctly, is a pleasant, sensible woman.”

“She is marrying my cousin, Mr. Collins. The one who will inherit Longbourn and currently holds the living at Hunsford.”

The ticking of the grandfather clock filled the silence that fell between them.

“I will start making plans tomorrow,” he said with what he hoped was a pleased smile.

The corner of Elizabeth’s mouth lifted slightly and he knew she was not fooled but allowed him a reprieve. “Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I bid you goodnight and will see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Elizabeth.”

He watched her leave yet another room

where he did not escort her, but this time his heart was not heavy. Indeed, it raced a little faster and if it had legs, would have danced a merry jig.



The mystery as to the exact nature of her husband continued, Elizabeth thought as she made her way to her chambers. Tonight, he had stood before his closest family members and declared that he loved her. At the time, she'd forgotten how to breathe, her surprise was so great.

He loved her!

How in the world was that possible?

Her own heart and mind were beginning to soften with regard to him, but his past actions had been so vile... How could she possibly forgive and forget so quickly? She had to maintain an air of reserve and watch him carefully. Leopards did not change their spots and taciturn gentlemen from Derbyshire

did not become social butterflies overnight. And yet, he had not prevaricated in his declaration. No embellishments, no coy looks in her direction to see if she was impressed by his stand against his aunt. In fact, he said the words as though they were fact and not feeling and neither his cousin the colonel nor his uncle had seemed surprised. Mr. Darcy was a mystery she had not the energy or slightest hope of unraveling at this time.

The other event from today, which she cherished, was seeing Sophia and José again. They were always such pleasant company and she had looked forward to traveling with them to Spain when the duke finished his assignment as Ambassador and returned home. She was glad Lord and Lady Matlock had already decided to accept and acknowledge her before learning of her family background, although it did not hurt for their newest niece to have a duke and a king as distant relatives.

Betty waited for her and when she entered the bedchamber, asking if she wished to bathe before going to sleep.

“No, I might fall asleep in the water and drown.” She turned so her maid could unbutton her dress. “Ask me on the morrow. I might have a long soak after my walk.”

“As you wish, Mrs. Darcy. The footman who is to escort you, Harry’s his name, has asked if you wish to take some bread for the ducks.”

“I would. Thank him for reminding me.”

Elizabeth appreciated the thoughtfulness of Mr. Darcy’s... no, of *their* servants. It was time she quit dividing her thoughts into his and hers. For a successful marriage, she must begin to think of everything as theirs and ours.

She thought, after such a busy day and tumultuous evening, she’d fall asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. Instead, she lay awake for another hour, the room draped in darkness. Mr. Darcy loved her. How was that

possible? She knew his attitude toward her had softened, given that he asked permission to use her given name and had traveled to Meryton with an amended marriage settlement – all before he knew of her elevated connections. Maybe their marriage could succeed. And with that on her mind, she slid into the welcome arms of Morpheus.

She could do this.

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She could not do this! That odious man masquerading as her husband had invited the Bingleys for an evening's amusement of cards. The Bingleys! When he casually dropped the catastrophic news like a misplaced cannonball at breakfast that morning, she almost picked up the teapot and poured what remained all over his favorite fawn-colored breeches that so lovingly clung to his muscular thighs.

“It is a longstanding invitation, Elizabeth. They have always come here for Twelfth

Night, and I did not even think about it until Jenkins asked what I would wear this evening.”

“You do realize Jane arrives this very afternoon to stay until we return to Meryton for Charlotte’s wedding.”

“I agree the timing is less than desirable.”

“Less than desirable.” She snorted softly. “You are the master of understatement. I would not be caught out like this if you would let me keep a social calendar of what is happening in our home.”

“Surely when you meet with Mrs. Whittaker to go over the household accounts and menus, you would have discussed tonight’s refreshments.”

“You have not given me any authority in this house, Mr. Darcy. In fact, several weeks ago when I suggested I speak with Mrs. Whittaker about the week’s menu, you accused me of undermining your housekeeper’s decisions. You let me know, in

no uncertain terms, I am Mrs. Darcy in name only. Since then, I have done nothing but embroidery, read books, and taking long walks to your footmen's despair."

"You have not made any decisions regarding the running of the house at all?"

"Other than replacing the linens and that reprehensible furniture in my bedchamber I have done nothing." Oh dear, she had not meant to let that bit of information slip out. Perchance he would think she replaced the furniture with items from the attic.

"Elizabeth, it was not my intention to undermine *your* authority – "

"No? You forget, your grand strategy was for me to be hidden away at Pemberley. You had absolutely no plans for a wife here in London. You say you wish our marriage to succeed, and that starts with you showing me the respect, which will flow down through your staff. As it is, Mrs. Whittaker thinks I am but a child who cannot handle anything

beyond deciding which spoon I should use to eat soup.”

“I will speak to the senior staff. You are my wife and mistress of this house. Forgive me for not seeing the obvious. You do have my respect and admiration. Having said that, I am sorry you are being forced to entertain those you are not fond of.”

“I will have no problem as hostess, it is my cousin I worry about.”

Her mind scrambled to find a gracious way out of the upcoming debacle. Jane would be absolutely mortified to spend time in their company knowing what she did now of the Bingley’s jaundiced opinion of their family. If only she had an ally in her corner.

She then recalled the letter from Jane shortly after Christmas, whereupon she mentioned the colonel’s introduction to the family and of Lydia and Kitty being relegated to the nursery. All in all, very bland, but for Jane to even mention a gentleman’s name was

telling. Her budding regard was tantamount to a declaration of love, or at least an infatuation.

Yes! Having Colonel Fitzwilliam as one of the guests would do nicely.

“What about one of your family members? I know it is last minute, but might Georgiana, or one of your Fitzwilliam cousins be amenable to bolster our numbers and provide a social hedge around my cousin?”

“I do not believe my sister would be comfortable with the Bingleys, however, Richard is quite adept in social situations and he most assuredly holds you in high regard. As does my aunt and uncle Matlock.”

“I believe that would be just the thing,” she said amidst a heartfelt sigh.

As it was, they managed to finish breaking their fast without further rancor and she then wandered down to Mrs. Whittaker’s office to see if there was anything she could do to make Jane’s time with them more comfortable.

“I don’t think so, Mrs. Darcy. We have things well in hand,” the housekeeper soothed in a sing-song manner. Elizabeth’s not-so-dormant ire raised its ugly head again.

“I have no doubt of your ability, Mrs. Whittaker,” she said with a forced smile. “Mr. Darcy does not employ fools or servants who lollygag about. I brought the subject up in order to advise you of my cousin’s preferences with regard to food and drink as she is allergic to certain foods.”

She clasped her hands in front of her body for two reasons. The first to stem her angry trembling, the second to keep her fingers from clenching as she thought about wrapping them around her haughty husband’s neck. He had promised to sort this out, until then, she would handle this in the only way she knew how.

“Tomorrow morning at nine o’clock, meet me in my private study to go over the week’s menu.” It seemed she would make use of the

late Mrs. Darcy's room after all. "Bring with you a record of every servant, male and female, and what duties they perform." She turned to exit the room, then paused, "And I will look over all receipts of kitchen purchases. I have noticed a lot of fish on the menu and would like to know why I have not been served hardly any beef, mutton, or fowl this past month."

Mrs. Whittaker stood, mouth slightly agape and internally, Elizabeth practically purred in satisfaction.

"That will be all," Elizabeth said to end their conversation and with a regal nod of her head, stepped out into the hall, feeling as though a huge burden had just rolled off her shoulders.

A few hours later, the Gardiner carriage rolled to a stop in front of Darcy House and Elizabeth barely kept her heels on the floor as she waited near the front foyer. Even though she and Jane had been separated for long

periods of time in the past – always voluntarily – this separation of four weeks had seemed interminable. Partly because it was forced upon them, and everyone had believed it had no end in sight.

The fact her husband had experienced a change of heart still surprised her. From the very beginning, his arrogance and conceit had planted seeds of disapprobation, watered by his behavior following the compromise, and left to fester in fast growing weeds by the knowledge he had intentionally hurt a beloved member of her family for no valid reason other than pride. Yet, he sought to make changes in order to please her and this had her mind in turmoil.

Finally, Burke opened the door and Jane stood before her, a picture of genteel femininity and beauty. She stepped over the threshold, bestowing a pleasant smile on Burke who blinked twice in quick succession. Elizabeth held back a snicker at the hint of

wonder that crossed the butler's usual staid features. Her cousin had that effect on mere mortals.

"I am so glad you have come!"

Now, she did bounce on her toes and surged forward to envelop Jane in a tight hug, having it returned in equal measure by her cousin.

"Let us enjoy tea while your trunks are unloaded and unpacked."

"Lizzy, I was only in the carriage for a half hour. It is not like I traveled from Hertfordshire."

"I have not seen you in over a month. It feels like you have been on the moon, not thirty miles of good road." She looped her arm through Jane's and led her to the family drawing room. Her cousin looked well, and once they were settled, she said, in a conspiratorial tone, "Now, tell me everything about the colonel."

Chapter Seventeen

Her cousin blushed a delicious shade of light pink and stared down at her clasped hands.

“There is not much to tell at this juncture.”

“You have been in town nearly a week and he has not called on you?”

“He has...” Jane kept her gaze lowered. “He has been a most proper gentleman.”

“And I am sure under the watchful eye of Aunt Madeline he has been most solicitous in that regard.”

“I will not have you tease me about him. I truly like him.”

“I have only met the man twice myself, so I cannot judge his true character – yet, but I give you leave to like him. You have liked

many a stupider person.”

“Dear Lizzy!”

“Oh! you are a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in anybody. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life. Not even the supercilious sisters.”

“I would wish not to be hasty in censuring anyone; but I always speak what I think.”

“I know you do and it is what makes you so uniquely Jane. You find the good in everything and wilfully disregard the bad. Anyone who cannot see the value of loving you is the world’s worst fool.”

“I have missed you so, Lizzy.” Jane threw her arms around Elizabeth and hugged her tight.

“You have successfully skirted telling me about you and the colonel. I now expect details. Lots and lots of details.”

“There is not much to tell. Since my arrival on the thirtieth, he has attended every

day for tea. We have gone for walks and time slips by so quickly. We talk about everything and nothing. It is the most comfortable friendship I have ever had. That he finds me easy on the eye is apparent, but his wanting to know *me*..., what I think, what I want..., it is gloriously freeing.”

“He wishes to know what you want,” Elizabeth whispered.

She felt a pinprick of tears behind her eyelids and in an attempt to calm her frazzled emotions, she fussed over fixing her tea. That Jane was aware of this became obvious when she placed her hand over Elizabeth’s and said, in a quiet voice, “What is it that you want? Is there anything I can do?”

“What I want and what I have do not always align.”

“What *do* you want?”

“I *want* a loving marriage. What I *have* is an uncontested battleground.”

“Then do something about it.”

“If only it was that easy,” she sighed. “He told his family at dinner the other evening he loved me.”

“That is wonderful news!” Jane hesitated. “Is it not?”

“I truly believe he did not mean to say the words. His aunt Catherine had pushed his anger too far and he said the one thing he knew to stop her cold.”

“Lizzy, no man says he loves a woman in front of family to stop a heated argument.”

“He might have. It most certainly worked.” She gave a wry smile at the memory. “When he said, *I love Elizabeth*, you could almost see the wind swoosh out of Lady Catherine’s self-righteous sails. The only thing that would have made the event more satisfactory was if Caroline Bingley had also been in attendance.”

“Lizzy,” Jane admonished gently. “You harbor resentment as skilfully as your husband.”

“It is a required element when next to you, dearest Jane, as you do not harbor resentment toward anyone. I take your share and gladly haul that burden around for you.”

A peal of laughter burst from Jane and Elizabeth almost cried at the joy her cousin exhibited. She had been shrouded by sadness far too long.

“I have missed you, sister of my heart. I am so glad to be in town where I can see you every day, now that your restrictions have been lifted.”

Elizabeth leaned in and whispered, “I would still have seen you, Jane. I had plans in place. Nothing could have kept me from your side.”

“I figured as much. You always were the strategist. It is why you consistently beat Papa at chess.”

“Not always.”

“Do not fudge the truth. Papa has not earned a victory since you turned sixteen.”

“True. I have tried to graciously lose, but he chastises me into playing an honest game.” Elizabeth noted, with great satisfaction, a sense of fulfillment wreathed around her cousin. A random thought popped into her head. “Jane, by chance, did my cousin by marriage attend you in Meryton?” The blush that spread across Jane’s *decolletage* was as good as her saying yes. “You sly thing. When and where – and do not even think about fudging the truth. I know you too well for that kind of deceit.”

“You can never tell Mama. She would call for the banns, or worse, force Richard to apply for a special license.” Elizabeth’s eyes widened when Jane unwittingly called him by his given name. Jane reached across and grasped her hand. “We have not done anything to warrant such, but we did meet at Oakham Mount one morning to greet the sunrise and spend time away from big ears and even bigger mouths.”

“I am the last person in the world to

censure anyone over such things. Having said that, I am surprised by your behavior.” Jane gasped and her eyes filled with tears.

Elizabeth mentally kicked herself for giving her cousin even a moment of distress. “Not for what you think. I am surprised you would rise early enough to see a sunrise. You are notorious for loving the comfort and warmth of your bed.”

Jane swatted at her hand. “Lizzy! I am not as bad as that.”

“Oh, yes you are. I shared a room with you for over sixteen years and know for a fact that you detest waking before the cock crows and adopt town hours when visiting aunt and uncle like a duck takes to water.”

“What can I say?” Jane fussed with her skirts, her cheeks a rosy pink. “I was greatly motivated to bundle up nice and warm and traipse up that blasted hill as though it was something I did regularly.”

“Then, I am pleased to inform you that

your motivation is coming tonight at my request.”

“Richard is coming here?”

“Yes, but there is also bad news, I am afraid. The Bingleys are coming tonight as well. It is one of the reasons I asked Mr. Darcy to invite his cousin to bolster our numbers. I did not want you to face Mr. Bingley and the sisters without reinforcements.”

“I am glad you told me. This gives me a chance to steady my nerves and prepare my mind.”

“If all else fails, turn your baby blue eyes in the direction of the good colonel and let him come to your rescue.”

“I am surprised you invited them at all.”

“I had no choice. Apparently, this is a longstanding invitation. The Bingleys have always attended Darcy House for Twelfth Night. Even Mr. Darcy had forgotten until this morning.”

“Would not the housekeeper have

informed you when you met to discuss menus?”

“Oh, my dear Jane. That is another conversation you and I must have.”

Elizabeth then proceeded to tell her, in detail, about her first month at Darcy House.

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Darcy remained in his study following the arrival of Elizabeth’s cousin. He did not feel he should intrude on their reunion as he would see Miss Bennet at dinner before the Bingley’s arrived. After spending a good fifteen minutes staring at the same column of figures in his ledger, he gave up and pushed away from his desk, and started for the door. He may as well change for dinner because he would get no work done today.

He had only made it around his desk when the door opened and Richard walked in.

“Richard! You are here early. I did not expect you until later this evening.”

“You asked for reinforcements, so I came to get the lay of the land.”

“And a certain beautiful lady from the wilds of Hertfordshire had no bearing on your early arrival?”

“Now, Darcy. I would never poach another man’s wife,” Richard teased.

“Do not even entertain a wisp of thought for my wife and you very well know to whom I referred. You made your admiration clear when you returned from Meryton.”

“I still stand by that opinion,” Richard said while he helped himself to a glass of brandy. “She grows more beautiful every time I see her.”

“Every time you what?”

“I may as well tell you now. Otherwise, you will wonder why I attend your house even more than I have before.”

“Am I going to like what you have to say?”

“Frankly, I do not care. I am my own

man.” Richard sat down in one of the comfortable chairs situated near the fireplace and crossed one leg over his knee.

Darcy's whole body tightened. In dread or anger, he could not ascertain. He only knew Richard's flippant attitude made him uncomfortable. His cousin could very well muddy the waters with his shenanigans and ruin his chance to gain his wife's favor. If Richard dallied with Miss Bennet only to leave her high and dry when he took up with his next pretty bird... At times, Richard was worse than Bingley for falling in and out of love. How ironic they both were enamored with the same woman.

“Tell me you have not made an offer of marriage.”

“Very well. I have not made an offer of marriage.”

Somehow, that did not make him feel any better, but he had no time to debate the issue as he needed to change for dinner.

“Try not to drink all my brandy while I get ready for this evening.”

“I have no intention of becoming foxed if that is what you are intimating.”

“Not at all, only that good brandy is hard to come by these days, and you have an annoying habit of never touching the inferior stuff.”

“I make it a habit to never indulge in inferiority, be it brandy or women.”

Darcy let that oblique statement slide and with a curt nod of his head, left the study and made his way to the master’s bedchamber where his valet awaited. On his way there, he heard the murmur of female voices coming from the guest room Miss Bennet had been allotted for her week’s stay and smiled when happy laughter filtered out.

What a colossal fool he had been to keep his Elizabeth away from her family. Hearing her laugh was a balm to his soul and he prayed their relationship would only move

forward. But first, they had to get through this nightmare of an evening. The beginning of a headache throbbed behind his eyes.

“Jenkins, would you bring up some willow bark tea before I head down for dinner.”

“Would you rather use the powders, sir? They tend to act a little faster for you.”

His valet was well versed in the headaches he sometimes had.

“Yes, good advice. I need my wits about me. Thank you, Jenkins,” he said as his valet slipped out to make the requisite drink.

When Jenkins returned with the powders, Darcy noted he seemed nervous. His curiosity was satisfied when his valet cleared his throat and spoke.

“Pardon me for intruding on how the house is run, sir, but Mrs. Whittaker asked me to speak with you.”

“About what?”

“Well, sir, it seems as though Mrs. Darcy made some unusual requests earlier today and

Mrs. Whittaker is not sure if you were aware of them.”

At first, Darcy felt a frisson of anger, his thoughts automatically going in the direction of: *what right does she have to order about my housekeeper?* Just as fast, his knee-jerk reaction was diffused by the remembrance of their conversation whereupon he assured his wife that she did, indeed, have authority as Mrs. Darcy. Obviously, Elizabeth was not one to let moss grow on that particular stone and had turned it over.

“Did she tell you what requests my wife made?”

“Mrs. Darcy wanted a list of all servants and their duties and receipts of all purchases made for the kitchen. Apparently, she felt there had not been enough variety of dishes and wished to find out why.”

Guilt ate at his gut. He had been assiduously avoiding having meals with his wife and had no idea what she had for dinner.

Something Richard had, quite succinctly pointed out. Had his staff given her less than stellar service, feeding off his discontent? As his aunt, Lady Matlock was fond of saying, servants were the silent eyes and ears of every home. How you behave in front of them is how they will project your values inside and outside of the house, and he had not treated his wife the way he had been taught by his own father.

“Advise Mrs. Whittaker that Mrs. Darcy is the mistress of this house and to comply with any and all of her requests.” Hopefully, that would take care of that little problem and at the same time let his staff know he would not tolerate any disrespect for his wife.

“Yes, sir.” His valet then proceeded to wrap warm cloths around the lower half of his face.

Within the hour, he was freshly shaved and dressed, ready to enjoy dinner with Elizabeth, Miss Bennet, and Richard. The

Bingleys and Hursts were slated to arrive around eight p.m. for cards. Thankfully, not to dine. He was not sure if he could stomach Miss Bingley sniping at his wife and her sister over a well-cooked meal. A repeat of her behavior at Meryton would not be tolerated, nor would she have him as a willing ally. He was not only honor bound to deflect her oblique criticisms and innuendos, but he also would not stand for the woman he loved to be verbally degraded. He had learned from his folly and would not make the same mistakes.

Dinner was deemed a success and they retired to the drawing room where Elizabeth played and Jane sang. Both he and Richard sat and listened, each enraptured with their object of desire. All too soon, Burke announced the arrival of their guests and the pleasant atmosphere disappeared. He noticed both of the ladies squared their shoulders and took deep breaths. He sent a silent prayer for strength as the doors to the drawing room

opened and Bingley, with Caroline on his arm entered, followed by Mr. and Mrs. Hurst.

“Darcy, it is so good to see you again!” Bingley enthused, his gaze flicking about the room, stopping when he landed on Miss Bennet. He made to step toward her, but Caroline tightened her grip and kept him anchored to her side.

All of this took only a few seconds to play out, and Darcy would have missed it if he had not been watching his friend so closely. He was worried about how he would behave around Miss Bennet, and also what Richard might do. He had made no bones about the fact he was very interested in the beautiful lady from Hertfordshire and would not take kindly to Bingley hovering around her like a hopeful bee to a favorite flower.

“Bingley, Miss Bingley, Mr. and Mrs. Hurst,” Darcy said by way of greeting.

Mrs. Hurst followed her husband, who gave both ladies a respectful bow of greeting

before turning to Richard and speaking with him in a low voice. Miss Bingley focused her sole attention on Darcy.

“Mr. Darcy. I am always delighted to be welcomed into your home. Why, I have been here so frequently, I feel as though this house was my own.”

Darcy’s spine stiffened at what she inferred.

“Come, Caroline. We have not been here that much.”

“You forget, brother, that I have visited often with Miss Darcy in this very room. Why, she is almost like a sister to me,” Miss Bingley said with a sideways glance at Jane. Knowing what she wrote to Miss Bennet after the ball at Netherfield, Darcy’s anger rose in tandem with his intense dislike of the woman. About to give her a well-deserved set down, Caroline spoke again. “Is *dear* Georgiana joining us tonight? I would so love to hear her play the pianoforte. There is no one who can perform

like her.”

“My sister is staying at my uncle’s house for the interim.”

“Yes, I would presume, given the circumstances that is a wise choice.”

The narrowing of Elizabeth’s eyes did not bode well for Charles’s sister. Darcy almost felt sorry for Miss Bingley when his wife’s countenance cleared and she smiled. Not a friendly smile, by any stretch of the imagination, but one which reminded him of a cat that had found a new mouse to play with. He cast a quick glance at Richard and noted he also watched her intently. His cousin had hinted his wife had a core of steel beneath her wit and grace. Would her steel take the shape of a cudgel or the sharp edge of a rapier?

Elizabeth rose to her feet and joined Darcy, twining her arm with his. He looked down at her with surprise and a little trepidation.

“Thank you for showing so much concern

for my sister, Georgiana, Miss Bingley. Last I saw of her she asked if she could remain with Aunt Lucinda... oh, forgive my rudeness, you only know her as Lady Matlock.” Her smile widened as Caroline’s nostrils flared. A rapier it was, then. “Anyway, Georgiana wishes to give us some privacy and joins us tomorrow, now that Jane is here.”

“Then I must make sure I call upon her when she arrives,” Miss Bingley simpered, unaware that one could bleed out from the cuts of a thousand knives as well as a frontal attack.

“I am afraid we shall not be at home tomorrow. My sisters and I have been invited to Hertford House.”

“Hertford House! Why would you be invited to the Spanish Embassy?”

“Come, let us all get seated and I will ring for tea. Or would you rather some Madeira, Mrs. Hurst?”

Darcy did not dare smile over the fact his

wife chose not to answer Miss Bingley's question and rather had deflected the conversation to Mrs. Hurst. It seemed like the kitty did not want the mouse to have too much information. For now, he would follow her lead.



“You have the devil's own luck when it comes to whist, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Hurst said as he and his wife lost yet another hand to Richard and Jane. Elizabeth curbed a smile. Beneath Jane's calm façade lay a razor-sharp mind with the uncanny ability of knowing who held what cards at all times. It was also one of the reasons she avoided playing *Vingt-et-un*. She always seemed to know which card would turn over and grew bored with the game too fast.

The evening had been fairly enjoyable with one table playing whist while the other played Euchre. Footmen came in and removed

the tables and chairs and Darcy poured each of the men a snifter of brandy. The ladies commandeered two of the three settees that formed a cozy grouping.

“My dear Miss Bennet, I am so worried for you,” Miss Bingley said suddenly. Jane said nothing but gave Miss Bingley her undivided attention. Taking Jane’s silence as tacit agreement to continue this vein of conversation, she said, “I worry that you have reached a certain age with no hint of a marriage prospect.”

Elizabeth dearly wished Miss Bingley had kept her avowed written promise of not acknowledging Jane in any way and decided to insert herself into the conversation.

“Miss Bingley, how thoughtful to concern yourself with something you are so very familiar,” Elizabeth said through a smile as fake as Caroline’s. “How do *your* prospects fare?”

She heard the colonel snigger and then

murmur to her husband. “Whom do you think Elizabeth will choose as her second?” She fought the inclination to turn her head and tell him it would not get that far. Miss Bingley would concede the field before the night was over and she planned on taking no prisoners.

“My prospects are none of your concern, Miss Eliza,” Miss Bingley said, her nostrils flaring in anger. “Pray, excuse my interference. It was kindly meant.”

“I am sure it was. Whilst I am sure Jane appreciates your interest, you may safely set your worries aside. She *has* received an offer of marriage.”

From her peripheral vision, she noticed the colonel straighten at her words.

“She has?” The officious orange shrouded prig dared raise a hand to her throat as though such a notion was beyond belief.

“Indeed, however, she turned the gentleman down.” The colonel’s shoulders slumped in relief. Most excellent. “That was

when both of us swore we would only marry for the greatest of love.”

“How... quaint.” Caroline cast a coy glance at Mr. Darcy. “Did you keep your self-made promise and marry for love, Miss Eliza?”

She had the audacity to snigger and covered her mouth with her fingers.

“Mrs. Darcy has no need to answer such intrusive questions and I ask that you desist,” her husband answered the presumptuous question in a hard voice. “It is enough that *I* married for love.”

At his declaration, Elizabeth thought for sure Caroline would swoon, right there on the settee. Unfortunately, that did not stop her from turning her attention back to Jane. She critiqued the cut and color of her gown to the way she styled her hair. Nothing escaped her notice. Through it all, Jane remained frightfully quiet, and still. Oh, so very still. Finally, Elizabeth had enough.

To know your Enemy, you must become your

Enemy.

“Colonel, would you help me with something?”

“What might that be, Mrs. Darcy? A more handsome husband? A larger home?”

“I have no need of another husband, nor of a larger house. In penning a note to your mother, I was stymied over a word selection.”

“You, stymied?” Mr. Bingley exclaimed. “You are the most well-read lady I have ever come across.”

“I needed a word for caustic language or unwarranted criticism. It was on the tip of my tongue, swirling about, but I cannot, for the life of me, remember that word.”

“Vitriol, dearest,” Jane said from her chair and almost everyone swiveled to look at her. These were the first words she’d spoken voluntarily all evening. “The word you are looking for is vitriol.”

“Of course! How could I forget, given the company we are in this evening?”

She turned her hard gaze to Caroline who had become as still as a garden statue. “I am sure *you* have heard that word before Miss Bingley, in your travels about town and visits to obscure little tea shops.”

From the corner of her eye, she noticed her husband’s raised brow at the warning shot she lobbed across the bow of Miss Bingley’s boat and cared not. He allowed this viper in their home and more the fool was he if he did not think she’d protect her family from its deadly venom of hatred and contempt.

“I am not sure I have, Mrs. Darcy.” Miss Bingley replied, her chin jutting out in defiance.

Good, the little snake knew exactly what she inferred.

“Fear not, Miss Bingley. I will not belabor the matter. Instead, I need not send the note as I will see her ladyship tomorrow evening at the theater. She is such a delightful person, very caring and protective of *her* family.” She

turned her attention to the colonel who watched with ill concealed glee. “Is that not so, Colonel?”

“Very protective, Mrs. Darcy. In that regard, you have much in common.” Upon that declaration, he approached Jane. “Would you care to take a turn about the room with me, Miss Bennet?”

The relief and appreciation in Jane’s eyes touched Elizabeth’s heart. She was so thankful she had asked Mr. Darcy to invite his cousin. With great pleasure, she noted the way he tucked Jane’s arm against his body and covered her delicate hand with his large one. It appeared the good colonel was just as smitten with her cousin as she was with him.

“What play are you attending, Darcy?” Mr. Bingley asked, his gaze following Jane and the colonel. “Mayhap we could join you.”

“My... *our* box is at capacity,” Mr. Darcy amended with a contrite look in Elizabeth’s direction, “as both Georgiana and Richard

have consented to join us for the evening along with Elizabeth's aunt and uncle."

"We shall be such a merry party," Elizabeth enthused.

"Is that your family from *Cheapside*, Eliza?"

"As a matter of fact, *Caro*, they are my cousin Jane's family."

"I do not understand. Are you not Miss Bennet's sister?"

"Mr. Bennet is my late father's elder brother. The connection to Aunt and Uncle Gardiner is through Mrs. Bennet, although I think of them as my own flesh and blood." Elizabeth slid her glance to Jane to see how she fared, relieved to see the return of her familiar serenity. "Regardless of how we are acquainted, I love them dearly."

"My goodness. So many cousins trotting about," Miss Bingley tittered, apparently feeling the danger to her social standing and the wrath of Lady Matlock had passed. "What

next, a disclosure that you are somehow related to Mr. Wickham?”

Elizabeth knew it was her overactive imagination, but she almost heard her husband snap to attention at the mention of Mr. Wickham. What a ninny-hammer Miss Bingley was, trying to cause more trouble by mentioning the name of that man in her husband’s presence.

“Mrs. Darcy,” the colonel interjected smoothly from the far side of the room, showing that even though he walked with Jane he had not tuned out their conversation. “Have you any information with regard to your estate? Have you found new tenants to lease the property?”

What a delightful rogue. He obviously was aware of her holdings.

“What! You own property!” Miss Bingley’s mouth started to hang open in surprise, but she caught herself and clamped it shut.

“I inherited an estate from my father when

he died.”

“How clever to rent it out. I am sure there are plenty of people who, in a feeble attempt to drag themselves out of the gutter of trade and mediocrity, seek small estates to lend themselves an air of credibility.”

“My current lease holder’s fortune came from trade.” Elizabeth struggled to contain her mirth. “And made it very obvious their intention was to increase their social worth, by any and all means. At least, that is my perception of them.”

“And where is your little estate?”

“In Hertfordshire, and it is not a small estate. You might say it is on par with Netherfield Park.”

Of all people, Mr. Darcy gave a snorting kind of cough, excused himself, and reached for his drink. It seems he was also aware of her estate and then mentally chastised herself. Of course, the revised marriage settlement. How much more did he know?

“How convenient. Is this estate close to your family’s home in Merybell and Longbird?”

“Would you, perchance, be referring to Meryton and Longbourn?”

“Yes,” Caroline said with a sniff and wave of her hand. “The name of that provincial little town always escapes me.”

“My estate is quite close, Miss Bingle. We are practically neighbors.”

“Bingley.”

“Yes?”

“My name is Miss Bingley.”

“I am aware, Miss Biggley.”

“Did we meet your tenants whilst there?” Mr. Bingley asked, his worried gaze flicking between his sister and the newly minted wife of his best friend.

“Miss Eliza – ”

“Mrs. Darcy,” her husband said, his patience clearly coming to an end. “You will refer to my wife as Mrs. Darcy.”

Miss Bingley opened her mouth as if to speak again when Jane and the colonel finished their circuit and he said, "Come sit by me, Miss Bennet and I will tell you all about my forays into the wilds of Spain."

"I have heard Spain is quite beautiful." Jane allowed the colonel to seat her on the empty settee before lowering his large frame next to hers.

"It is and the people who hail from there are just as beautiful, ferocious and protective of what they see as their own."

Jane sent a soft glance toward Elizabeth. "Yes, they are."

"Would anyone care for another cup of tea?" Elizabeth offered in a bright voice. "I have a delicious Oolong I purchased a few weeks ago. Miss Bingle? Tea?"

"I do not care for a cup of Oolong tea," Miss Bingley forced out between thin lips.

"I would love another, Mrs. Darcy," Mr. Bingley almost sighed and looked at Jane with

what could only be described as sad puppy eyes.

Oh, for heaven's sake, Elizabeth huffed out in thought and prayed Jane did not fall for his pitiable act of lost love. She then noted the colonel flex his fingers, looking as though he wished to rearrange Mr. Bingley's face. She dared to catch the colonel's attention and arched her brow. He gave a slight start before the corner of his lip curved in a small smile.

It was then she saw that her husband had watched the entire silent exchange and although his face retained a shade of hauteur she had not seen in ages, a small twinkle did appear in his eye. There was hope for him yet.

Chapter Eighteen

Darcy heard the quick double tap on his bedchamber door, recognizing Richard's signature knock. His valet carefully laid down the single edged razor, wiped his hands, and opened the door to admit him. He then calmly took back up his task and finished shaving his employer. While he waited, his cousin paced to the window and stood overlooking the back garden which led to the mews and stables.

Once his face was cleaned of all soapy residue Darcy stood and shrugged into his tailored jacket and then patiently waited while Jenkins tied his cravat in what looked like deceptively simple knots. Only then did he address his cousin.

“Did you sleep well?”

Richard had stayed the night following the

evening of cards. This was not out of the norm, but now that there was a woman involved, his cousin's interest in staying at his house instead of his parent's, only a few short blocks away, was suspect at best.

"I did." Richard made to turn from the window but suddenly leaned in, his attention centered on activity outside. "Bingley has arrived."

"This early?" Darcy strode to the window and joined his cousin looking down onto the mews.

"He looks a little haggard," Richard said with more than a little self satisfaction threaded throughout his tone.

"I may as well go down and wait for him. Jenkins, advise Burke I will see Mr. Bingley in the library and have him send in some coffee." He crossed the room and said to Richard as they walked down the stairs together, "I will see you later for breakfast, then."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no," Richard tutted.

“You are stuck with me like mortar to brick. Your flibbertigibbet friend is here to talk about his angel and if you think I am going to trot off like a good little boy until you are done, think again.”

Darcy held back a sigh of defeat. His cousin was tenacious and would not back down or retreat in the face of an adversary, no matter from what quarter.

“Very well, but please do not kill him. I had the rugs cleaned a few short months ago from when you spilled that brandy.”

“That was not me, it was Ash.”

“I blame you both. You are too old to wrestle with your brother over who gets the first taste of my father’s French brandy.”

“You wound me, cousin. You are never too old to fight for a good brandy... or a good woman.” He stopped at the study door and opened the door. “After you, kind sir.”

They each settled into a chair and awaited the announcement of Bingley’s arrival.

“Mr. Bingley, sir,” Burke said after knocking lightly and pushing the door open.

Bingley hurried into the room, greeting the two men with a garbled good morning. He then realized he still had his hat in hand and handed it to Burke before advancing a few steps. Darcy took this time to study his friend and, Richard was right, he did look quite unkempt.

“Have you slept at all, Bingley?”

“Not a wink. Caroline ranted for most of the night and when she finally went to bed, I found my mind would not stop thinking.”

“That must have been a novel experience,” Richard muttered beneath his breath.

“This is my fault,” Darcy said and gave Richard a look that told him to keep his opinions to himself. “I should have sent a note and canceled last evening’s activities.”

“But why?” Bingley sputtered. “We have always come for Twelfth Night.”

“Charles, you must realize how awkward

it was for everyone involved.”

“I know there is no love lost between Caroline and Mrs. Darcy, but surely we can all get past that as we might soon all be family.”

“What exactly do you mean you could soon all be family?” Richard asked in a deadly quiet voice.

Darcy instinctively tensed, ready to come between the two men if needed. Relief washed over his shoulders when Mrs. Whittaker appeared with a tray of coffee and biscuits.

“Thank you, Mrs. Whittaker. Has my wife called for her maid yet?”

“She’s already out and about on her walk.” At his look of concern, she hastened to appease his worry. “She always goes with one sturdy footman, Mr. Darcy. She knows not to walk alone.”

“Very good. That will be all, thank you.”

She poured them each a cup of coffee and then left the room.

“You did not answer my question. What

did you mean by family?”

Richard had eased back in his chair, taking a sip of the strong brew. Bingley picked up the silver tongs and dropped four pressed sugar lumps into his coffee. As he stirred the sugar to dissolve, he answered.

“I know I left Meryton quite precipitously last November, but prior to that, I am confident Miss Bennet held me in some regard. I mean to take up our courtship and ask her to be my wife.”

“If you knew she held you in some regard, why did you leave?” Richard asked, his voice dangerously soft. “Did you not think she would wonder why a gentleman, who had given her his undivided attention, would leave like a thief in the night?”

“I did not leave like a thief in the night!”

“You left the area without saying your farewells to any of the residents of Meryton, least of all the Bennets.”

“There was so much confusion following

the... the incident at the ball.” Bingley chewed his lip, seemingly deep in thought. It became quite apparent he was agitated. “Do you think I should speak with Jane... er, Miss Bennet?” he finally blurted out. “You know, to explain my reasons?”

“No.” Darcy gave a sad shake of his head. “It is time for you to find another lady.”

“But surely she will forgive—”

“I am under the impression that she is, at present, being courted by another gentleman.”

“She lost her affection for me so quickly?”

Richard grunted and Darcy was close enough to him to hear him grumble, ‘Insolent pup.’ Bingley may not have heard what was said, but he knew Richard had said something.

“What do you make of all this, Colonel?”

“While you attended balls and charmed other women, did you think Miss Bennet waited by her window in the faint hope of your eventual return?” Richard leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. A

picture of deceptive calm. “I can tell you, for a fact, Miss Bennet *is* being courted by another gentleman.”

“By whom?” Bingley demanded.

“Me.” Richard gave him what could only be called an insolent smile.

“You!”

“Charles – ” Darcy began.

“You knew of this?” Bingley’s focus switched from Richard to him.

“I only found out myself last night. My cousin and I have not had time to discuss details.”

“What...? How....?” Bingley ran a hand through his hair, causing the red gold curls to fall about in a mess. “You always said you had to marry a well dowered woman. How can you afford to wed someone like Miss Bennet?”

“Bingley is not wrong to ask you that question,” Darcy interjected because his cousin looked as though he wished to take the younger man apart with his bare hands. “It is

well known the Bennet sisters do not have much by way of a dowry.” He held up a hand when his cousin began to argue. “They have a nice portion from all the careful planning Elizabeth and her uncle have done, but not enough for an estate or any type of comfortable housing.”

“I do have an estate.”

“You do?”

“What estate?”

Bingley and Darcy spoke at the same time. Richard chose to answer Darcy.

“The one mother brought with her when she married father. It is hers to bequeath as she sees fit and as she had no daughters, it is mine whenever I wish to take possession.”

“What will you do for money? You cannot live on love.”

Darcy well knew his cousin made a healthy living for a single man, but to support and wife and future children would be difficult at best.

“Not that it is any of your business, but I have a nice tidy sum saved and the estate clears about four thousand pounds per annum.”

“That much?”

“Aye.”

“Wait one minute,” Bingley finally sputtered out. “Are you attempting to steal Jane from me?”

Richard directed a hard glare toward the younger man, disdain etched on every feature of his face. At least, Darcy recognized it as disdain. Bingley did not know his cousin as well as him.

“*Miss Bennet* is not yours to steal. You fled Meryton at the first whiff of scandal and your sister followed up on your atrocious behavior in the form of a poison pen letter which spelled out in clear concise terms what she thought of Miss Bennet and her family. She also outright lied in saying you were betrothed to Georgiana. As one of her guardians, I find

that piece of gossip highly offensive.”

“She would never do that.”

“I have read the letter, Charles. She did exactly that.” Darcy said quietly.

“But why?”

“Are you daft, man!” Richard finally exploded and stomped to the far side of the room before turning around. Darcy saw his hand clench and unclench into a fist and knew he’d purposefully distanced himself from Bingley to stop from taking a well-aimed jab at his face. His cousin, having gained control of his anger, stalked back toward Darcy and Bingley, his steps measured and firm.

“Your sister continually maligns Miss Bennet and Elizabeth. Her tongue is so spiteful it is a wonder that she can taste any food or drink over the bitterness that fills her mouth.”

“Caroline wants only what is best for me.”

“Believe that if you must, but your sister looks out for only one person, and that is herself.”

“I do not understand. When... where did you meet Miss Bennet?”

“I met Jane” – Bingley winced at Richard’s use of her given name – “when I attended Meryton on business with the ___shire Militia not long after Darcy and Elizabeth wed and knew immediately, she was a lady of refined manners and gentle disposition.” He gave Bingley the gimlet eye. “I did not require anyone’s permission to court the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld. Beautiful not only in physical composition but in her soul.”

“I am very well aware of her good nature.”

“Are you? What else are you aware of? Tell me some things about this woman you claim to love.”

“Well... she loves to dance and is kind.” Charles’s voice drifted off. “She looks lovely in the shade of light blue; the color brings out her eyes.”

“You misunderstood. Tell me something of substance.”

“I... I...” Bingley floundered. “I have not seen her in months.”

“And whose fault is that?” Richard held up his hand to forestall Bingley from answering.

“Then I will tell you some things. Were you aware she has an old blanket tucked in her memory chest which had been wrapped around a puppy she tried to save when she was eleven? For three weeks she nursed the poor thing, only to watch the wretched animal succumb to its injuries. She kept the blanket as a reminder that things we treasure are temporary.” Richard slid a glance at Darcy before he spoke again. “At the age of fifteen, the year she came out, she and Elizabeth wrote a manifest of love, which is why they are adamant about marrying only for love and nothing else. She is allergic to mushrooms, and tears glisten on the tips of her eyelashes at the sight of a perfect sunrise. She loves her

family with a fierceness which, frankly, surprises me, yet she still sees the good in people. Even those who try to hurt her. Did you know she cried when Mr. Bennet made her show Darcy the letter your sister wrote?”

“He what? She did?”

“Yes, would you like to know why?”

Bingley could only nod his assent.

“She worried your sister’s words would damage our friendship,” Darcy cut in before Richard could speak. “Not once did she mention the hurt your sister’s words did to her heart and soul.” How had he not seen her goodness for himself? Even now, he was humbled by her generous spirit. Richard would do well to marry her.

“You and I will speak later of how you know Jane cries at the sight of a perfect sunrise,” Darcy said in a low voice.

A dull red crept up Richard’s neck and he nodded in agreement.

“I do not know what to do, Darcy. I

followed your lead after the ball.” Bingley said, oblivious to the undercurrents flowing around the two cousins.

“If it is any consolation, Charles, I am extremely sorry for my behavior. At the time my anger was the only thing feeding my soul and I did not care who got hurt in the wake of it.”

“Darcy, you take too much on yourself. No one forced Bingley to leave Miss Bennet behind. He has to accept the consequences of *his* actions, just like you have had to accept yours.” Richard said, his tone exasperated.

Bingley sat, elbow on the arm of the chair, his chin cupped in the palm of his hand. Every now and then he would heave a great sigh. Richard, with a slight tilt of his head toward the younger man, gave Darcy a look which he understood immediately. It was a, *what do we do now?* kind of look. He had no answer and replied with a slight shrug of his shoulders. Not too many minutes had passed when

Bingley heaved another of his heartfelt sighs and then rose to his feet. Darcy and Richard stood as well.

“I have a meeting with my solicitor this afternoon, so I must not tarry any longer.” Bingley straightened his waistcoat. “Shall I see you gentlemen at the theater later this week, or perchance our club?”

“Most assuredly at the theater. Elizabeth is looking forward to the evening. I cannot speak for Richard, but I usually attend my club on Tuesdays, so if you are there at the same time, let us enjoy a drink together.” *Away from your sister*, Darcy did not add.

“I would like that, Darcy.” Bingley gave them each a polite nod of the head.

They watched Bingley leave, shoulders sloped, having had his hopes dashed and Darcy wondered if he would broach the subject of the letter with his sister, and even if he did, would it make a difference in how Miss Bingley behaved around Elizabeth and her

family. Thinking of his extended family, he needed to have an uncomfortable conversation with Richard.

“Now, about that sunrise,” Darcy said in a voice that brooked no prevarication from his cousin after they had returned to the library.

“I may, or may not, have traveled to Meryton a few times after Christmas, and may, or may not, have met with Miss Bennet on Mount Oakham to welcome the day.”

“Richard, what if you had been seen?”

“Very likely we would be married. I should have made a lot of noise and alerted the neighbors. I would be a happy man if someone had discovered us.”

“Be glad that did not happen. I do not think her family could survive another scandalous marriage.”

“The Bennet’s are stronger than you think, cousin.”

“I am aware, but why court trouble when you can court the woman honestly.”

“How poetic, Darcy. Having a wife has been good for you.”

“Having Elizabeth as my wife has been good for me.”

“She was magnificent last night, eh?”

“I thought she was going to eviscerate Caroline, right before our eyes.”

“Miss Bingley is lucky she managed to escape with her turban intact. I thought my mother was formidable but having seen Mrs. Darcy in action...” Richard gave a fake shudder. “The mater is quite taken with your wife. The two of them together will be unstoppable.”

“Miss Bennet was no wilting flower. She held her own. She was well within her right to cut Caroline directly, yet she stayed.”

“I am intrigued by the dynamic between Miss Bennet and her cousin.”

“Her father once told me they were two sides of the same coin. He was not wrong.”

“Just as we are Darcy. I am the laughter

and light, you are the dark, brooding, foreboding – ”

“I got the picture, Richard. No need to beat a dead horse.”

“Twice now, you have said you love Elizabeth in front of others alongside your wife.” Richard turned his astute gaze upon him. “Has she made a comment on this?”

“As you said earlier, not that it is any of your business, we are continuing in the process of becoming more comfortable with each other. I know she does not return my feelings, yet there has been a thaw in her manner. We are growing a friendship.”

“How appropriate as spring is but a few months away.” Richard picked up his riding gloves and slapped them against his thigh. “Can we now go for a ride before the park becomes too congested?”

“Yes, although it will be considerably shortened in length as I would like to join my wife for breakfast.”

“I also wish to return for breakfast and gaze upon the lovely Jane Bennet, dreaming of when she will grace my table alone.”

“You will behave, cousin or I will call in reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements? Who?”

“Ash.”

“You would not dare!”

“One misstep in your courtship and your brother will descend upon this house like the plague.”

“I do not want the viscount anywhere near Jane. If he so much as catches a glimpse of her beauty he will envision the family jewels around her throat and the Viscountess Ashton’s tiara pinned atop her golden curls.”

“You must admit, the tiara is much coveted and would look good on my sister by marriage.”

“Do not even voice that suggestion in case it takes root and begins to grow,” Richard said and glowered in his direction. “Let us ride

before anyone else interrupts us.”

Chapter Nineteen

Elizabeth handed off her outwear to a waiting footman.

“Has my sister risen from her bed?” She asked Burke when the footman retreated with her belongings.

“I understand her maid went upstairs to assist her twenty minutes ago, ma’am,” he said, after closing the front door.

“Excellent, that gives me some time to freshen up before I meet her in the breakfast room.” Burke gave her a polite half bow. She called him before he had a chance to leave.

“Burke, might I have a word with you, in my private study?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He followed her up the stairs to the second story and down the hall to the previous Mrs.

Darcy's inner sanctum. Elizabeth walked over to the desk but did not sit down, instead, she turned and faced the silent butler.

"I am well aware my husband has passed down the word that I am to be respected as mistress of this house and this has ruffled the feathers of some servants. I wish to speak with you privately and assure you I have the highest regard for you as a person, and as our butler."

"Thank you, Mrs. Darcy."

"I am not one to sing my own praises, but it behooves me to advise you that I am the owner of a substantial estate and have run it successfully for over eight years on my own."

At the raised brows of the butler, she smiled.

"I was but twelve when I took over the reins of Netherfield Park, however, my uncle felt it was important that I understand how an estate is run and how to deal with servants. I had to fire my first steward at the age of

fifteen. The experience was quite traumatic, but taught me a lot in the way of being responsible not only to my family but also to my tenants.”

“I have no complaints with how you run this house, Mrs. Darcy.”

“I chose to speak with you in private because I am well aware Mrs. Whittaker is more than a little upset over changes I have initiated, and sometimes a word from a trusted co-worker and friend goes further than me explaining my background as I have done with you.”

“I do believe I could put a subtle word in her ear, ma’am.”

“Then we are done here. I do not wish to embarrass her and cannot change the way I was introduced to this household. I can only move forward.”

“I have known Mr. Darcy from the time he was a lad in short pants and I can tell you, with the utmost confidence, he has the highest

regard for you. It was not evident at the beginning of your marriage, but it is now. He has found joy in your union.”

“Thank you, Burke. We are a work in progress.”

With that, the butler gave her a low bow and left the room. She stood silent for a few minutes, thinking about what he said about Mr. Darcy. Even the servants noticed his change of behavior. Was this the sign she looked for? Could she trust that his change of heart was not a whim, but something of long duration, as in a lifetime?

The chiming of the clock let her know it was coming up to ten o'clock and surely Jane would have come down to break her fast by now. She moved toward the breakfast room and met her cousin as she came down the main stairs. Arm in arm they walked together and soon were seated in the sunny room, talking over the events of last evening.

“I am so sorry you were subjected to the

company of Mr. Bingley and his sisters.”

“Now that this first meeting is over, I feel perfectly at ease. I know my own strength, and I shall never be embarrassed again by his coming. It was publicly seen that, on both sides, we are able to meet only as common and indifferent acquaintances.”

“Of that, I have been assured and I also know you will have the ready assistance of the good colonel to aid you in that endeavor.”

“Tease me not, Lizzy. I like him very much.”

“And the feeling is reciprocated, I assure you.”

A companionable silence fell between them as they finished breaking their fast and then stayed to enjoy another cup of tea.

“I did not have the time to ask you yesterday how things were going with Mr. Darcy. Richard has very high regard for him, as did Mr. Bingley if you recall.”

“I do believe he is a good man, yet I find it

hard to forget his behavior immediately following the ball. No, that is not entirely true. I cannot forget his behavior prior to the ball. He was abominably rude and has always held such disdain for our family.”

“Oh, Lizzy. You cannot know that for a fact.”

“But I can. I did not tell you what I overheard between the five of them when you were so ill at Netherfield Park. First, I did not want to cause you concern when you were not at your best, and second, I was trying in some way to mitigate the nastiness of Miss Bingley. If she were to become your sister, I did not want to heap more bad behavior on her scrawny shoulders.”

“This sounds quite ominous.”

“I had gone to retrieve my shawl and upon reaching the entrance to the drawing room where everyone was still assembled, the door was ajar and I clearly heard their conversation from the hall. As did any servant who

happened to be in the room, I might add.” Elizabeth huffed out an angry breath at the memory of the sniping of Miss Bingley and the derogatory opinions expressed by her now husband. “It was plain to me that the sisters had been harping on your mother’s family connections because as I approached the room, I heard Mr. Bingley say, *‘If they had uncles enough to fill all Cheapside, it would not make them one jot less agreeable.’* To which Mr. Darcy said, *‘But it must very materially lessen their chances of marrying men of any consideration in the world.’*”

“Mr. Darcy was not wrong, dearest. We do have low connections.”

“Sheer hypocrisy! Miss Bingley and her sister decry our low connections and what of them? Who was their father? Who was their mother? It makes me furious.”

“Mama’s family ties do lower our social currency, and Lydia and Kitty did not aid our cause with their wild behavior. I, for one, am

so glad Papa relegated them back to the nursery until they reached the age of seventeen.”

“I thought they were banished until they turned eighteen.”

“He has agreed to a soft come out at local assemblies and dinner parties when they turn seventeen. Lydia is extremely vexed because this means Kitty will have a full year and a half on her before she makes her debut.”

“What of Aunt Francis? Surely she is not in favor.”

“No, Mama has been quite vociferous in her complaints. Papa always counters her by saying, *‘I have heard your many complaints, Madam, and yet I remain unmoved.’*”

“I can hear my uncle saying those very words,” Elizabeth said with a chuckle.

“Lizzy, you promised to tell me your great secret and I have waited patiently. Why do Mama and my sisters need not worry about our future? Longbourn is still entailed and

even with Charlotte by our cousin's side to facilitate a peaceful transition, we will still be moved from our home on the passing of my father."

"Your words are true but your father and I have been setting aside funds for all of you. When uncle passes, almost everything within the walls of Longbourn will be removed and transferred to whatever house we purchase." Elizabeth paused for a brief moment. "I believe the beds in the master and mistress chambers stay as well as the dining room table, and some of the silverware. Everything else has been replaced over the years and will not go to Mr. Collins."

"Mama does not have the kind of funds to purchase a house."

"She does. Through our joint efforts, Aunt Francis has about twenty thousand pounds to her name."

"Twenty thousand!"

"Aye, and all four of you have five

thousand as your portion when you marry.”

“How...? How could we have such vast sums? Longbourn barely clears two thousand pounds per annum. At least that is what Papa has told us.”

“Uncle and I may have led you on a merry chase these past few years.”

Elizabeth then revealed to Jane how she and her uncle diverted funds into her name and then re-invested the money into trust funds for his wife and daughters.

“Is that fair to Mr. Collins and Charlotte?”

“Only you would worry about Mr. Collins.” She placed her hand on Jane’s arm in an attempt to soothe her. “Longbourn clears a little over five thousand pounds per annum. With no money being diverted toward Papa’s own family, Mr. and Mrs. Collins will be quite wealthy, and Charlotte is wise enough, having learned to economize from both her parents, to keep her husband from behaving foolishly with his new found wealth.”

“So that is why you promoted Charlotte over any of your cousins.”

“Partially. None of the girls are remotely ready for such responsibilities. As it is, Mr. Darcy has agreed we will attend Charlotte’s wedding and I plan on telling her everything so she can plan accordingly.”

“What of yourself, Lizzy? You have contributed greatly to *our* comfort. What of your own?”

“Fear not, Jane. I have been well taken care of not only by my father but also by *Abuelos*.”

“Your grandfather? How do you mean?”

“I have over eighty thousand pounds in the bank, along with family jewels which are passed down from mother to daughter. I have not seen all of them, but have been told their value is in excess of sixty thousand pounds.”

“Oh my...” Jane whooshed out softly before bringing her hand up to her throat.

“Yes, oh my.” Elizabeth smiled. “I also

have an estate.”

“I heard as much last night. You said it was in Hertfordshire. Where is it located? Have I ever been there?”

“You spent almost a full week there, although you were not in the pink of health at the time.”

“Netherfield Park?” Jane’s eyes widened. “You own Netherfield Park?”

“Yes.”

Complete silence fell between the cousins, then Jane began to laugh. She laughed until tears formed and then laughed some more. Elizabeth could not help herself, she joined in. This was how the two gentlemen found them.

“What is so funny?” Darcy demanded, even though his lips quirked in tandem with their laughter and subsequent hiccups.

Elizabeth, wiping tears from her eyes, responded with, “Oh, husband, I have just told Jane about Netherfield Park.”

Her heart fluttered madly in her chest at

the wide smile that graced his face, causing his dimples to appear and she was struck anew at how handsome her husband truly was.

~ ~ ~

She called him husband. Not Mr. Darcy, but husband!

It took every bit of his vaunted self control to steady his breathing and *not* drag her up against his body in order to kiss her senseless in front of their respective cousins. Instead, he smiled and moved with a modicum of calm to sit in the chair beside the love of his life.

“Will you ladies stay as we break our fast?” he asked as he settled in beside Elizabeth.

“Of course, although we do have to change before we meet up with Aunt Lucinda and Georgiana later today,” she answered, seemingly not to mind that his shoulder brushed hers ever so slightly.

“What do you have planned?” Richard

asked.

“I am not sure. Your mother has an itinerary for my introduction into society. I believe we shall visit a few shops. Aunt Lucinda has decided to take a soft approach over the next few weeks before we storm the fortress of Almack’s and its patronesses.”

“Might Richard and I join you? At least for a portion of the day. It would lend credence to our marital felicity and grease the wheels of your social carriage.”

“I have no qualms over you joining us, although I suspect that as soon as we approach Hatchard’s, you will forget you have a wife and sister.”

“I will never forget I have you in my life, Elizabeth.”

His voice was low, meant only for her, and her eyes widened, the pupils dilating. Pleasure skimmed through his whole being at her outward acceptance of a light flirt. She blinked quickly when Richard cleared his throat.

“Do you mind, Miss Bennet, if a crusty old soldier encroaches on your time with your cousin?”

“I do not mind, Colonel.”

Darcy watched as Jane held Richard’s gaze before lowering her eyes and blushing slightly. What he wouldn’t give for his wife to look at him with the same yearning. He then caught Elizabeth observing him with astute eyes. Almost as if she knew what he was thinking. No, that could not be true, for if she did, she would run for protection behind a very secure door.

He rose and attended the sideboard, filling a plate before rejoining his wife at the table. As he pulled in his chair, he also jiggled it so that he sat closer to her and their legs brushed against each other beneath the table. Her cheeks turned a delightful light pink and he tucked into his food feeling very satisfied with himself. However, all good things must come to an end and the ladies excused themselves to

change for the day.

“Are you not a little too old to play footsie beneath the table,” Richard teased as soon as the women cleared the room.

“Upset that you did not think of doing the very same thing?”

“And who says I did not?”

“Me, for if you had, Miss Bennet’s face would have been the color of a raspberry torte.”

“Little do you know, cousin.”

Darcy immediately felt an irrational anger rise up in his chest. A protective streak for his cousin by marriage. “You will not treat her as one of your lightskirts. She is a gentlewoman and deserves your respect.”

Richard straightened in his chair, then leaned forward over the table, his blue eyes piercing Darcy’s soul.

“I will forgive the offense you just leveled in my direction because I understand why you feel the need to protect your wife’s cousin, but

hear me clearly, *Fitzwilliam*.” – Darcy knew his cousin was more than a little angered when he called him by his given name – “I intend to ask Jane Bennet to be my wife. She is not a little bit on the side, nor is she someone who I am flirting with to bide my time. She is the only woman I can see in my life and I will thank you to not tell me how to court her.”

“Forgive me, Richard. I overstepped. This is the first time I have seen you enamored with a woman enough to even think of marriage.”

“She is the first woman who has ever made me want to approach the institution without recoiling in horror.”

“You well know the origins of my introduction to the Bennet family and my preconceived prejudices. Having said that, I can say without a single quibble that Jane Bennet is most deserving of your time and attention, and when she accepts your proposal, I wish you joy.”

“I am ready to propose this very day. I only pull back on the reins to give her time. It has only been a few short months since Bingley dangled her heart above a pit and cut the ribbon. I will not rush her into a decision, even though I believe she holds me in high regard.”

“I cannot judge her feelings. She has always presented a mask of calm.”

“You are a fine one to chastise someone for hiding their feelings behind a mask.”

“True, which is why I have no opinion in this matter other than you will treat her with respect and do not make me send my wife in to chastise you. You will not like the results.”

“No, I would not. She is a student of the *Art of War*.”

“She is?”

“Oh, yes. She laid out her long-term plans for her marriage the first day I met her. I knew, right at that moment, you had no chance of victory.” All of a sudden, Richard

slapped his thigh and burst out laughing.

“What?” Darcy asked. “What is so funny.”

“I have just realized your wife played me for a fool that morning.”

“I do not understand.”

“I was gently advising her that even though she had compromised you, you were a good man.”

“She did not compromise me.”

“Of that, we are aware, but remember this was her second day at Darcy House. In our conversation she brought up some of the terms of the original marriage settlement and let me know that you had allotted her only fifty pounds per annum.”

“I was such a beast. How she can look me in the face, I do not know.”

“You will appreciate how she played me like a finely tuned pianoforte. As I grumbled about taking you to task, she began listing off all the things she could *not* purchase with that miserable fifty pounds.”

“Again, I do not understand.”

“Having met her youngest cousin, I now know she emulated Miss Lydia as she wove a sad tale of not being able to buy boots, winter clothing, or women’s delicacies. How she would have to choose one thing over another. How, if she bought cloth to make dresses, she could not afford gloves or a bonnet.” Against his will, Darcy’s lip quirked. “She beat me at my own game. I, who interrogate spies for a living, was taken in by a slip of a girl the first time I met her. Given what we know of her own personal wealth, she had to have been laughing uproariously on the inside.”

“That is not all, Richard. I made the mistake of telling her she could only bring one trunk with her and made her wear a torn ball gown for her wedding.”

“You truly did not want that woman to fall in love with you.”

“Not at the time, however, she also hoisted me on my own petard. The day

following our disaster of a wedding, at least eight trunks and some personal furniture was delivered to my front door. She informed me quite succinctly that while I had said she could not *bring* anything, I had not stipulated her belongings could not follow.”

“Darcy, I am so glad she is an ally to our family.”

“My sentiments exactly.” Darcy rose to his feet. “I will call up the carriage. The ladies should be ready to depart soon.”

Chapter Twenty

Elizabeth experienced a tingle of anticipation as their carriage rolled through the gates onto the gravel drive of Longbourn Manor. Quick tears sprang up in her eyes when she spotted most of the family gathered on the front portico to greet the prodigal niece and her husband. Her heart fairly burst when the carriage pulled to a stop and a footman opened the door.

Mr. Darcy exited, then turned around to help her disembark. She'd barely made it two paces before she was enveloped in a hug from Mary, of all people.

"Lizzy!" she exclaimed and burrowed her head into her shoulder, sobbing with great gulps of air between hiccupping sniffles. "I have missed you soooo much!"

“Mary, dearest. I have missed you as well.”

She looked over her cousin’s shoulder toward her uncle and lifted a brow in question. He gave a small shrug and then held out his arms. After disentangling herself from Mary, with a promise to talk with her further, she moved into her uncle’s warm embrace.

“Mary has the right of it. We have missed you, oh so very much.”

Knowing that Mr. Darcy was witnessing an emotional reunification of her family, torn apart by his own demands, she regretfully separated from her uncle and turned to her aunt.

“Aunt Francis, it is so good to see you.” She looked past her presence and spied their faithful retainers hovering near the entrance. “And you as well, Hill and Griggs. Please convey my greetings to Cook as I am sure she is busy in the kitchen preparing a feast.”

“That she is, Miss Lizzy... I mean, Mrs.

Darcy.” Hill looked at Griggs who merely nodded his head in a fashion which told her it was an honest mistake to call her by her former, more familiar moniker.

“Come into the house, everyone. ‘Tis not the middle of summer, you know, and we may as well continue this visit in front of a nice fire with a cup of tea,” Aunt Francis said and quickly began to herd everyone into the manor.

Once everyone was in the front parlor, her aunt turned to Mr. Darcy and greeted him with a bit more warmth than Elizabeth expected. Obviously, her husband had begun mending fences with her family when he visited to amend the settlement. However, upon seeing Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had followed in his own carriage in case he was called back to London for an emergency, Mrs. Bennet’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Colonel, what brings you to Longbourn?”

“I wished to accompany my cousin.”

“Your cousin? Who is your cousin?”

“Darcy, ma’am.”

“Mr. Darcy! Lizzy’s husband is your cousin?”

“He is, Mrs. Bennet.”

“And why did you not share this information when you were last here?”

“I did with your husband, but did not see the need to share further, at the time.”

“That still does not explain why you choose to attend the wedding of Miss Charlotte Lucas when you have not been introduced.”

Elizabeth hid a grin by turning her head. Richard had insisted on accompanying them, which she and Jane knew full well would set the matrimonial antennas twitching on Mrs. Bennet. After this week, the secret courtship between her two favorite people would very likely come to an end, which she suspected was the real reason Richard insisted on joining them. He wanted everyone to know he was

courting Miss Jane Bennet, and if Mr. Bingley ever returned to Netherfield Park, the news would reach his ears upon his first visit to any of the prominent families he'd befriended.

A very good strategy, which Elizabeth fully endorsed. At one time she'd been very angry with her husband for not revealing his intent to marry her, an action which had ultimately chased Mr. Bingley away from Meryton and Jane. However, as soon as her anger had receded, she realized that no one had forced the amiable man to tuck his tail between his legs and hie off to London. Jane needed a man who would stand with her, no matter what came their way – and the good colonel was that man.

“Auntie,” Elizabeth soothed, “the colonel is part of our family and is a great friend to my husband. He is a welcome addition to our party.”

“Well, any friend and family member of Mr. Darcy's will always be welcome here, to

be sure; but I must say that I hate the very sight of him,” Mrs. Bennet said in a surprisingly low voice so none but Elizabeth could hear, for which she was grateful. Jane did not need the added burden of disappointing her mother at this tender juncture of their courtship.

For the time being though, her aunt’s focus remained solidly on her and Mr. Darcy, especially upon the discovery she made after assigning them the guest suite her brother and his wife used when they stayed at Longbourn. It was an ill-kept secret that Aunt Madeline had never used the comfortable bed in her chambers, preferring to sleep with her husband. When Mrs. Bennet discovered that Elizabeth not only kept to her own room, but Mr. Darcy never crossed the shared sitting room to visit his wife, she decided to help their intimate marital relations along.

Soon, none too subtle hints were being whispered into Elizabeth’s ears.

“I dare say your neckline could be dropped a little lower. Mr. Darcy would love nothing better than to see how lovely his wife is.” Or, “Mrs. Hill has just told me your bed has been infested with a type of bed bug. You will have to share Mr. Darcy’s tonight. I would hate to have your skin mottled by a multitude of bites before we see everyone at the wedding.”

Lizzy opted to share a bed with Jane that night, much to her aunt’s chagrin. And now, the next morning, the ladies were enjoying a moment of quiet in the front parlor. Mr. Darcy and Richard has gone riding and it was the first time the three women were alone. Upon spying the two men returning from their ride through one of the windows, it did not take long for Aunt Francis to give vent to her ill concealed dislike of Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Good gracious!” cried Mrs. Bennet, “if that disagreeable colonel is not hanging about again with our dear Mr. Darcy! What can he

mean by being so tiresome as come with you to Miss Lucas's wedding? Upon your arrival, I had no notion but he would go visit Colonel Forster, or something or other, and not disturb us with his company. What shall we do with him? Jane, you must walk out with him when they return so that he may not upset dear Lydia again."

Lydia, upon seeing the colonel seated at the family table for supper their first evening at Longbourn, flew into a fine temper and after stomping her feet in displeasure, had run to her room and refused to come down until the next day. After her display of childish petulance, uncle advised his wife that Lydia would remain in the nursery until their guests departed for London. He went further and threatened, given her propensity to behave as a child, that she would remain upstairs until after her eighteenth birthday, missing the soft come out at local Assemblies as promised.

As it was, Aunt Francis looked to Jane to

alleviate the tension by removing the colonel from her company. Elizabeth could hardly help laughing at so convenient a proposal. Jane would love nothing better than to continue her courtship away from the jaundiced view of her mother.

As soon as the men entered, Richard looked at Jane so expressively, and with such warmth, as he left no doubt of his good intentions. The exception being the mother of said daughter, who refused to look at him, or even acknowledge him in the room. The colonel was not one to let opportunity slide by and so he said aloud, “Mrs. Bennet, have you no more lanes hereabouts in which Jane may lose her way again to-day?”

Elizabeth well knew he was playing into her aunt’s schemes of finding ways to leave her and her husband alone together. His seeming willingness to aid and abet Aunt Francis’s machinations earned a small reprieve from her dislike because she bestowed on him

a friendly smile.

“Oh, yes, I advise you and Jane,” said Mrs. Bennet, “to walk to Oakham Mount this morning. It is a nice long walk, and I am sure you have never seen such a lovely view.”

Both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy spared Jane a quick glance. She blushed quite becomingly at her mother’s innocent remark.

“I will admit, I would very much like to see the view from Oakham Mount.” Richard enthused, not removing his gaze from Jane.

“Indeed, Colonel. It is too bad we did not know earlier of your desire to traverse our most famous high point, for we could have arranged to watch the sunrise,” Elizabeth teased her cousin by marriage and was delighted to see his cheeks also turn a warm red. “That is when you will find the view even more enticing.”

“Lizzy!” Jane hissed a warning beneath her breath before rising to her feet. “We shall gather our shawls and join the gentlemen

outside.”

As the two girls went upstairs to get ready, Mrs. Bennet followed, saying, “I am quite sorry, Jane, that you should be forced to have that disagreeable man all to yourself. But I hope you will not mind: it is all for Lizzy’s sake, you know. If she does not secure her husband’s affection, he could throw her off and then none of you girls will marry well. You do not need to exert yourself in his company, though, and there is no occasion for talking to him, except just now and then. So, do not put yourself to inconvenience.”

At the top of the stairs, Jane turned around to face her mother.

“I will do my very best to keep the colonel engaged, Mama.”

Once again, Elizabeth had to turn aside and pretend to straighten the ribbon around her dress in order to hide a grin.

“Bless you, daughter. I regret you having to be in his company. I had such high hopes

for him and Lydia when last he was here, but... oh, well. Nothing to be done about that now. If the man cannot see what is before his very nose, there is not much I can do about that.”

“No, Mama,” Jane soothed as only she could. “You cannot dictate where the heart will lead.”

Aunt Francis laid a hand on Jane’s cheek and gave her a sad kind of smile. “I would suppose you have intimate knowledge of that fact.”

“I am well, Mama. Mr. Bingley did not touch my heart. I think of him as an amiable friend and if we were to see each other on the street, I am able to greet him as a pleasant acquaintance.”

“I have said it more than once. You are beautiful on the outside, as well as the inside.”

Upon those words, Mrs. Bennet turned on her heel and hurried down the stairs all the while muttering about men and how they did

not see the goodness before them. Elizabeth and Jane shared a look between them before fetching their shawls and joining the gentlemen outside.

As they walked toward Oakham Mount, they met Charlotte and Mr. Collins walking together down a quiet laneway. Upon spying them, Charlotte's face lit up in joy.

"Eliza!" she called out and urged Mr. Collins to walk faster, who looked decidedly uncomfortable and had visibly blanched upon greeting them. "I am so glad you are come."

"Did you think I would miss the wedding of my closest friend?" Elizabeth gave her friend a warm hug, then stepped away to smile at Mr. Collins. "I also would not wish to miss the wedding of my cousin, who was so very wise in choosing Miss Lucas as his future companion."

"Indeed, Cousin Elizabeth, I am a fortunate man. Come, Miss Lucas, we should return to the house. There is much to be done

before tomorrow.” He did not even spare Mr. Darcy a glance.

“Might I walk with you a bit, Charlotte? We are on our way to Oakham Mount and will share the path with you until we have to break off.”

“Of course, you may.” Her friend flicked a glance toward her betrothed before saying, “Mr. Collins, you may be able to tell Mr. Darcy of his family in Kent. I am sure he will be pleased to hear how well Miss de Bourgh is doing.”

Both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins looked absolutely horrified at the thought of conversing with each other. One because the man was a sycophantic fool, the other because his patroness was absolutely livid over the fact her nephew should have married her daughter. However, neither lady gave them the chance to decline their suggestion as they linked arms and continued down the path, heads close together. Elizabeth began to

explain the true financial condition of Longbourn and what Charlotte could expect to find when her uncle finally passed onto his reward.

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Darcy watched his wife as she strolled off with Miss Lucas, then turned his attention to Mr. Collins, who also watched the ladies. He struggled to think of something to say when Richard came to his rescue.

“You know Lady Catherine?”

“I do,” Mr. Collins replied and then his eyebrows rose, as though realizing for the first time that his cousin Jane was walking arm in arm with a gentleman. “Cousin Jane, I am well pleased to see you again.”

“How is it that you know Lady Catherine?” Richard asked again.

“I am the rector at Hunsford. Her ladyship is my patroness.” The heavysset man rocked back on his heels; his manner strangely

nervous. “What business do you have, asking about Lady Catherine?”

“She is my aunt.”

“You are a Darcy?”

“No, I am Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.”

Mr. Collins’s eyes rounded in surprise, or horror. Darcy couldn’t quite tell.

“You are the son of Earl Matlock.”

The parson bowed so low in greeting, Darcy was convinced his nose touched the ground and prepared himself to grab the funny little man in case he toppled over. “Mr. Collins, my cousin is not royalty. You do not need to genuflect in his presence,” he admonished.

“I am honored you are here. I have been told so much about your family. Lady Catherine is prodigiously proud of them... rather, she is proud of most of your family...” The sentence trailed off and Mr. Collins began to turn an interesting shade of puce and began to sweat. He cast his gaze longingly after his

betrothed and cousin.

“Does she still go on about that cradle betrothal?” Richard asked.

Mr. Collins dragged his attention back to the colonel.

“She is most adamant and very distraught over the whole thing. Why, she has written an expose about Cousin Elizabeth for the *Gazette*. She says she does not care how much it costs to purchase a whole page...” Mr. Collins’s voice trailed off when he saw the look on Darcy’s face. “Oh, dear me. I should not have said anything.”

“But you have, Mr. Collins and I demand that you tell me everything my aunt has planned, for not only does this concern me, but also your cousin, Mrs. Darcy. It will be her name dragged through the mud, and her family that will be hurt. Can you live with yourself if that happened?”

“I... I... She will release me from my living!”

Jane stepped forward and laid a hand on Mr. Collin's arm. "Mr. Collins. Standing before you are two very powerful men. I do not believe they will allow their aunt to hurt you in any way, and as a Christian and spiritual leader of your flock, it is your duty to see that no harm comes to others."

The parson continued to open and close his mouth like a fish gasping for air out of water.

"Mr. Collins, I am privy to information you are not." Richard began. "My father, Earl Matlock, was the executor of the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh's will. Although Aunt Catherine tends to rule Rosings Park, she has no authority. My cousin Anne is the legal owner as she came into her inheritance upon her majority. Also, the living at Hunsford can only be removed by the archbishop, so if my aunt threatened you with that, rest easy."

Mr. Collins swallowed hard, looked at both men, swallowed again and then began to

Speak.

“She is writing all about the compromise and paints the picture that Cousin Elizabeth set out to trap you on the terrace, with lurid details of her gown being torn and her bosoms exposed to the gaze of everyone who came outside after the fact.”

“That is all?” Darcy demanded, feeling Mr. Collins was not being entirely truthful. When the man swallowed again, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, he knew there was more.

“If this fails to entice you to divorce my cousin, she has hired some men to...” He began to perspire profusely. “They are to take her to an unknown location, keep her there for a few weeks so that her reputation would be thoroughly ruined and in disgust you would cast her off.”

Darcy grabbed the man by his neck cloth and dragged him up to his face. In his fury, he did not even register the weight of the man,

nor the fact his toes barely touched the ground.

“You were going to stay silent and allow all of this to happen!”

He flung the man from him in disgust and Collins fell to the ground, trembling. He awkwardly rose to his feet and reached inside his greatcoat.

“No! I wrote you an anonymous letter.” He pulled out a letter and handed it to Darcy, the envelope quivering in his hand he trembled so hard. “It details everything. I was going to post it from London on our way to Kent tomorrow.”

Darcy snatched the missive from his hand, seeing clearly his name and direction on the front of the envelope.

“You have earned yourself a reprieve, Collins,” he snarled and stuffed the letter in his coat pocket. “I will read this tonight and if I am not satisfied that you have revealed all her plans, do not show up for your wedding

because Miss Lucas will be made a widow before the day is over.”

“Everything is in there. Even more than what I have told you,” he said, wringing his hands. “I would never have allowed her to hurt my cousin.”

“Does Anne know what her mother is about,” Richard asked.

“Absolutely not!” Mr. Collins drew back in revulsion. “She is delighted with the fact Mr. Darcy has married and can now pursue... Oh dear, I was not supposed to talk about that either.”

“You are having an exceedingly difficult day, are you not, Mr. Collins?” Jane’s soft voice cut through the tension.

“Indeed, I am. All of this is in the letter. Oh, dear. I did not want Mr. Darcy to know I had written it.”

Darcy decided to take some pity on the man.

“Mr. Collins, if what you have assured us

is true, I will make it my mission to ensure Aunt Catherine never finds out how I discovered her nefarious plans.”

“I can help with that, Mr. Collins,” Richard added. “In my line of work, I come across all sorts of unsavory characters. If pushed for details, I will let slip that some ne’er do wells sold her out for clemency. She will believe that gobble-dee-gook because she would never think one of her servants would ever betray her confidences.”

“Some of what I shared was not told to me in confidence. I was working in the northeast corner of my garden and overheard some men talking. They, of course, had no idea I was behind the hedgerows, and were quite free with what she had tasked them to do. In fact, I firmly believe they were looking forward to the task.”

Dread and fury fought for purchase in Darcy’s gut. It was imperative he discovered what Aunt Catherine planned.

“I must go and read this letter. Richard, would you and Miss Bennet please escort my wife back to Longbourn?”

“Of course, and then I wish to look it over as well.”

“Do not let her out of your sight. I have a bad feeling about all this.”

Darcy turned back toward the manor while Richard and Jane, along with Mr. Collins, hurried to catch up to Elizabeth and Miss Lucas.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Is it bad?”

These were the first words Richard spoke as he entered Mr. Bennet’s study and closed the door behind him. Darcy nodded and then turned his attention to Bennet, who paled to the color of a bed sheet the further he got into the missive. Suddenly, his eyes widened and he leaned over and vomited into the waste paper basket by his desk.

“Let me see,” Richard demanded and Bennet handed over the letter.

Darcy watched his cousin closely and knew he had come to the vilest portion of the letter when he turned preternaturally still, his face transforming into a mask of stone. He had seen that expression before and knew these unknown men were already dead, they just

weren't aware of that fact yet.

"I will leave for London immediately. Father must be made aware of what she planned and I will send a contingent of good men to guard you whilst you are here and to escort you back to London."

"I have strong footmen. They are capable."

"No, Darcy. This calls for specific talents and your footmen, while strapping lads, would not be prepared to sink to the same depths as these Cretans if required. My men are trained in this and will not lose sleep."

"Elizabeth and I should return to London with you."

"Absolutely not! If you return too soon, you may tip Aunt Catherine off that you know something. Also, your wife would never forgive you if she could not see her closest friend married. Let her enjoy the day in peace and happiness." Richard folded the letter and placed it inside his pocket. "This also gives me time to put things in place for her protection."

Bennet stood, his face still pale, sweat beading on his forehead.

“Colonel. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. If we lost Lizzy...” Tears formed in his eyes. “I do not think my heart could take the loss. Not this way.”

“I had not intended to speak so soon, but I love Jane and wish to marry her. I consider you my family, Mr. Bennet, and will do what needs to be done to protect them. As will Darcy.” He clicked his heels together and gave Mr. Bennet a formal bow. “I must leave now if I wish to make London this afternoon. I will send notice of what I have put in place with my men.”

Richard left the room and Bennet sank back into his chair. He then scrunched his nose and pulled the lanyard to summon the butler.

“Forgive me, Griggs,” he said when the man appeared and handed over the basket. “I am afraid my nerves got the best of me when

the good Colonel asked for Jane's hand."

The slight twitch of the butler's eyebrows told Darcy the man did not believe what his normally satirical master said, but he wisely just nodded and accepted the basket.

"I will have one of the maids give this a good scrubbing and have it returned within the hour."

"No hurry, Griggs. Mr. Darcy and I have some business to discuss and do not wish to be disturbed."

The butler gave a nod and left with the putrid basket. Bennet reached into the drawer of his desk and brought out two tumblers, then a bottle of brandy. Without asking, he poured them each a drink and swallowed all of his in one shot before pouring another. Only then did he put down the glass and stared at Darcy, fear still very much in evidence in his eyes.

"What kind of madness does your aunt suffer? How could a Christian woman wish such vile things upon an innocent lady?"

“I do not know, but I will promise you that she will not succeed.”

“We must tell Lizzy.”

“No!”

“You cannot hide this from her. She has a right to know.”

“I will tell her, after the wedding. I wish for her to have a happy day with her friend. She is safe for now because my aunt’s plans were for the following week after we returned. I think Elizabeth is safe whilst here.”

“Where would she have gotten all those details of where Lizzy walked and at what times?”

“She must have someone watching the house.”

“No, the details were too specific and some of her phrasing too familiar.”

“Are you referencing that part about petticoats six inches deep in mud?”

“Yes, I remember Lizzy saying something similar when she regaled us all with stories

about her time spent at Netherfield.” Bennet glanced up at Darcy and winced. “She made sport of all of you, save Mr. Bingley. She was highly diverted by your condescending manners and snobbery.”

“No need to spare my feelings, I am well aware she did not hold me in high regard.” He paused in thought. “*Tramping about without regard for her petticoats, which some have said is six inches deep in mud,*” he quoted from the letter, “makes me think I know the source of her information.”

“Miss Bingley.” Bennet made an accurate guess. “She has never liked Lizzy.”

“No, she saw her as a rival. Not that I ever, *ever*, thought to make her mistress of Pemberley,” he stressed at Bennet’s raised brow. “All of her dreams were naught but wishful thinking.”

“Why would she write your aunt?”

“The gossip mill in town must be working overtime and very likely she heard snippets as

she prowled the parlors of chin-waggers. She may think that if she aids my aunt, she will gain a toe hold in the level of society she craves.”

“Miss Bingley expects a woman who castigates a gentleman’s daughter to lift a tradesman’s daughter into her circle of friends. I do not know who is more delusional. Lady Catherine, or Miss Bingley.”

“Be that as it may, she is very likely the source of Elizabeth’s walking habits.”

“Are you aware that because Elizabeth is of royal blood, albeit a minor royal, what your aunt has set in motion is treason?”

“That did cross my mind.”

“If this gets to the Palace, she will lose everything. The whole Fitzwilliam family will fall alongside her. The social carnage would be catastrophic.”

“My uncle, Lord Matlock, is a powerful man and enjoys a good relationship with the royal family. I believe he and his family would

survive. Also, Rosings is in my cousin Anne's name. Aunt Catherine has nothing but her personal funds and some family jewels. The estate would not be forfeit."

"But your aunt's life well could be."

Darcy heaved a heavy sigh. "Yes, it could. I will leave that in the hands of my uncle, the earl. I am hoping we can keep this within the family."

"We should join the ladies. They will be wondering why we have sequestered ourselves for so long." Bennet quickly finished his drink and then stood. "Are you able to keep this information from your wife? Can you project an image of calm and easiness, knowing what you do?"

"Although I normally abhor deceit of any kind, for Elizabeth, I will lie through my teeth and not bat an eye."

"I believe you son. Let us go."

Darcy drained his drink and set the empty glass on the desk. He stood and said, "I am

ready.”

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Elizabeth burned with curiosity. A very grim-faced Richard and a distraught Jane had accompanied Mr. Collins to where she and Charlotte awaited them on the path. She had just finished telling her friend all she could about the finances of Longbourn when the others came alongside.

Alarmed at the visible nervousness of her betrothed, Charlotte bade them all good day, saying she would see them on the morrow at the church. Elizabeth looked to Richard and Jane, asking after her husband, but they stayed as quiet as the Sphinx and she could not winkle out one bit of information from them. Not even Jane, who never before withheld secrets from her.

She could only deduce one thing. Given the nervousness of Mr. Collins, the determined levity of the colonel and the quiet despair of

Jane along with the absence of her husband led her to believe that something had occurred with regard to Lady Catherine. She was the only common denominator within this eclectic group of people and Elizabeth wondered what the woman had done now.

They arrived back at Longbourn and retired to the parlor where the colonel excused himself and hastened toward her uncle's study. Jane quickly became involved with pouring tea and then asked Kitty to show her some drawings she had made of a gown she wished to sew. Jane was so intent on not speaking with Elizabeth that her mother thought they had had a disagreement during their walk.

"Whatever happened? Did that dreadful colonel do something to upset you both? I see that he did not return with you. Is he hiding his face?" Mrs. Bennet huffed and smoothed out her skirts. "I hope he has left and returned to London. I do not know why he came here in the first place."

“Mama,” Jane implored. “The colonel has not done anything wrong and he is speaking with Papa and Mr. Darcy.”

All attempts to speak beside Jane were thwarted. If she weren’t so piqued by the whole affair, she would have delighted in the way her cousin neatly diverted all conversations without anyone in the room aware of her deviousness.

“Mr. Collins looked quite nervous today. Do you not agree, Jane?”

“I am sure by tomorrow, once Miss Lucas is his wife, all his nerves and fears will be laid aside.”

First point to Jane.

“The colonel was very quiet on our walk home. Did you find that he did not have much to say, Jane?”

“I am sure he was ruminating on the beautiful countryside. Hertfordshire is a delightful county.”

Second point to Jane.

“Why did Mr. Darcy leave so abruptly? We did not get a chance to walk all the way to Oakham Mount and I was so desirous of showing him the view.”

“I believe the heel on his boot had come loose. He did say he wished for us to continue our walk, but I knew you would much rather return home and be with family. We can always walk to Oakham Mount another day.”

This was getting her nowhere. She would have to be less subtle, it seemed.

“I never thought you would all become so discombobulated over Lady Catherine,” she said as her husband and uncle entered the room.

Jane gasped, “How...?”

Mr. Darcy immediately came to her side, and taking her hand in his, sat down beside her. “How much do you know?”

She watched Uncle Thomas almost fall into the chair beside Aunt Francis, his face so pale she thought he was deathly ill.

“Elizabeth!” Darcy brought her attention back to him. “How much do you know?”

“Nothing, it was an educated guess.”

“Thank God!” Uncle declared.

“What is going on, Mr. Bennet?” Aunt Francis demanded. “Who is this Lady Catherine?”

“She is my aunt, Mrs. Bennet, and the lone dissenting voice in my family over my marriage to Elizabeth.”

“Is this the same woman Mr. Collins always blathers on about?”

Although the tension was ripe in the room, Mr. Darcy could not help the glimmer of a smile to make an appearance at his mother-in-law’s description of Mr. Collins effusive praises of a woman who did not deserve one syllable of them.

“Yes, one and the same.”

“Oh, pooh. Who cares about a woman who lives in Kent and has nothing, whatsoever, to do with our family?”

“You are in the right of it, Fanny,” Uncle Thomas said, some of the color returning to his face. “How long until dinner, my dear?”

If Elizabeth had not worried something was afoot, the fact that her uncle called his wife ‘my dear’ was definitely a signal. He only did that when he needed to divert her attention elsewhere. Unfortunately, was unable to turn his niece’s mind from the previous conversation.

“Where is the colonel?” she asked.

“He had to return to London.”

“Interesting. He said he would only return if there was an emergency. Is there something I should be made aware of? Is Georgiana well?”

“As far as I know my sister remains at Matlock House and is enjoying our aunt’s company.”

“Hmmm... has anyone unearthed Lady Catherine’s much vaunted plans?” Her uncle dropped his tea cup and it shattered on the

floor. In the ensuing chaos, Elizabeth turned to Mr. Darcy and said, “Walk with me, husband.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Walk with me husband. Words he'd longed to hear for so long, but not today. Not now when she was intent on getting to the bottom of this mystery. They rose in unison and she led him upstairs and down the hall toward their suite of rooms, opening the door to the shared sitting room between their bedchambers.

"What has happened?" she asked as soon as the door closed behind him.

"Mr. Collins wrote me a letter, which he had planned to post tomorrow."

Her brow furrowed. "He is getting married tomorrow."

"True, but they are departing directly for Kent and he was going to post it when they stopped to rest the horses in London."

“Very well, the logistics make sense, now I need to know what he wrote that has everyone turned upside down and behaving in such a mysterious fashion.”

“First, your sister is not aware, fully, of what was disclosed.”

“She is obviously aware of some because she has been assiduously avoiding having a conversation with me. That is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. I knew something had occurred.”

“I think you are reading too much into her behavior.”

“Am I? Then, tell me. How is your boot?”

“My boot?”

“Yes, she said you had a problem with your boot which is the reason why you returned without waiting for me.”

“Oh, that.” He chuckled. “At times I am too vain for my own good. The tassel had come loose and I returned to have it repaired. Turns out it was not and I am as good as new.”

She crossed her arms across her chest and glared at him.

“I thought you once told me you abhor deceit of any kind.”

“I do!”

“You are an even worse liar than Jane. She said your heel was loose.” She stalked toward him and stopped inches from his chest, continuing to glare up at him. “Now tell me what is going on with Lady Catherine. What are you hiding?”

Mr. Darcy reached up and pinched the top of his nose between his fingers. Eyes closed, he huffed out a sigh and said, “Please take a seat, Elizabeth. You will need to be sitting down for this.”

She did as he requested and waited. Her husband paced in front of the fireplace for a few minutes before he stopped and faced her.

“My aunt has initiated a three-prong approach in her quest to ruin your good name. The first is purchasing a one-page layout in

the *Gazette*, whereupon she describes in detail our compromise, but painting you as the instigator and shares lurid details that both you and I will know as a false narrative, but the greedy public will not care. You will be cast in the role of a Jezebel, a harlot not worthy of pity. My understanding is that she wanted the headline to read, *HARLOT TRAPS RICH MAN FROM DERBYSHIRE*, or something along those lines. Mr. Collins was not too clear on that fact.”

“That is all? Surely the paper would not publish such trash knowing the power your extended family holds in London.”

“Disgusting as that is, it is not the worst. Mr. Collins gave me the letter, after I threatened bodily harm – you need to know this in case his future wife tells you of my actions – and your uncle, Richard, and I have read it. Richard has gone to London to secure guards for us here and on the trip home, as well as personal bodyguards for you once we

are in London. You will not go anywhere without them.”

“Them? I am to have more than one bodyguard? Even when I go for my walks?”

“There will be no walks in the near future, Elizabeth. Not until this danger has passed.”

“You have yet to tell me what this danger is.”

“I cannot. It is too vile... I can scarce bear to think of it.”

“I cannot protect myself if I do not know where the danger comes from. Please, William. Please tell me what I need to know.”

He almost forgot to breathe at her calling him William. Quickly, he gathered his wits and sat down across from her. He took a deep breath and began to speak.

“She has laid out two plans. If one is not successful, then the brigands she has hired are to enact the second plan.”

Elizabeth did not move but waited and watched with intelligent eyes.

“The week we return to London, during one of your walks, you will be abducted near a large grouping of shrubs and trees. My understanding is there are only two on the walk and at these times it is difficult to see the path from either side. From there, these men will take you to an undisclosed location.” At her soft gasp he reached across and laid his hand on her clenched ones, giving them a squeeze. “After a period of two weeks, they are to take you into London and drop you off in the middle of Bond Street”

What he omitted was the horrific fact the men had been told they could do any vile thing they wanted with his wife and if she survived their attentions – his hand still clenched in anger at the thought – they were to bring her back to London and strip her bare before dropping her battered and bruised body in the middle of Bond Street.

“Oh, my god!” Elizabeth exclaimed, holding her hand to her mouth to stop a soft

scream from escaping. “All because we married?”

“She has clearly lost all capability of reasonable thought. Richard is hoping his father can cut her off at the knees and is deploying his best men to find these brigands before they have a chance to initiate their attack.”

“You said there was a second plan.”

“Ideally, my aunt wishes for you to be shamed publicly in the most despicable of ways, however, if for some reason these men cannot take you to their hideout, she ordered them to sell you to the type of miscreants who take women and ship them abroad. You would never be seen again and I would have to wait for seven years before you are declared dead in order for me to marry Anne.”

“She is mad!”

“Absolutely and irrevocably.” He paused and gazed at his wife. “It is this plan which could be construed as treason. If this is leaked

to the Palace, they are within their right to demand she be put to death. Because you have royal blood, it would be a public execution and Lord and Lady Matlock would bear the brunt of the social fallout.”

“I do not wish for your family to suffer because of her delusions. Surely, based on this letter, it shows that she is working alone and must be constrained. Can the earl not find a place where she can be locked away forever?”

“I believe that is what Richard hopes to do as well. His first mission, though, is to find these men and stop the plan before they can carry it out.”

“You realize, if he cannot discover their identities, we must carry on and lure them out.”

“No!” He realized immediately what she hinted at. “I will not allow you to put yourself in danger.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Elizabeth started to speak softly, her voice

gaining strength as she went along.

“Engage people with what they expect; it is what they are able to discern and confirms their projections. It settles them into predictable patterns of response, occupying their minds while you wait for the extraordinary moment — that which they cannot anticipate,” she quoted from her favorite book. “I will not be the one walking the path. These men will expect a petite, short brunette who likes to wear green. I am sure you have a stable hand who is slight in body who can trod the path in my stead.”

Once again, he was astonished by her intelligence and it may have been the only time in his life that he wished he was not sturdy and tall because he would gladly wear a dress and wig if it meant saving her life.

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Dusk had just settled over the horizon when twelve war hardened men rode onto the grounds of Longbourn. Uncle Thomas and

William met and escorted them to the stables where they would set themselves up temporarily. Soon, two men were situated near the main entrance into the house and the servant's entrance at the side of the house. Two men patrolled the perimeter and two men were placed inside the house. One kept Elizabeth in sight at all times and when she retired for the night, stood guard outside her bedchamber door, the other sat in a chair facing the staircase that led upstairs. These six men took the night shift and early in the morning they would be relieved by the other six men who would be sleeping in the stables. This rotation would vary, in case Longbourn was being watched. At all times there would be eight men outside, and four men inside. Monday, when she and William were scheduled to travel home, all twelve soldiers would ride alongside their carriage for the entire trip. Nothing was being left to chance.

Dinner was a strained affair as Aunt

Francis attempted to find out why there was a very large man standing inside the dining room while they ate.

“It is a precaution, Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Darcy had a very credible threat levelled against him and he saw fit to ensure his safety while away from his home.”

In no way would Uncle Thomas tell his wife that she, Elizabeth, was threatened. Her aunt’s nerves would be unable to deal with the stress.

“Would the threat be from that terrible man, Mr. Wickham? He was so very angry about Mr. Darcy refusing him the living and all the money he was to have received.”

“You know about that, Mrs. Bennet?”
Darcy asked.

“Oh, yes, but the colonel told us how he had been paid and all of his sad story was nothing but a pack of lies. But you know how people can get all puffed up with pride. Mr. Wickham would like to have a piece of you, I

am sure. It is good you take your safety seriously. He was a military man. He could well do you harm if he so wished.”

Elizabeth stifled a soft snort behind her napkin. Even if Mr. Wickham was not on his way to Australia, there was no way – at least, not in this life time – that he would ever have bested her husband. He was too lily livered to do anything more than whine and complain.

Because the ladies would need some time in the morning to dress for the wedding, they all agreed to retire earlier than normal. Elizabeth walked upstairs with Jane and after wishing her goodnight, continued on to her bedchamber. The soldier, whom she’d learned was called Bellows, padded behind them on silent feet. She gave him a nod of recognition before closing her door and locking it behind her as instructed.

Her maid awaited within and helped her undress then unplaited her hair and began to brush it out.

“You have a key to the room, Betty?”

“I do, ma’am, but upon leaving the room I am to hand it to the guard.”

Elizabeth felt comforted by the thought, but then her mind began to run amok. What if the guard were one of the henchmen? He would have access to her at night, when no one would hear or see his activity. She sat at her vanity table long after Betty left, tormented by her own thoughts and fears. Finally, unable to quell them, she rose and silently moved toward the connecting door to the shared sitting room with her husband.

Keeping her head cocked, listening for any movement in the hall, she opened the door and entered the room. She made her way to the small table by the window. The moonlight which filtered through the semi-sheer curtains gave her enough light to see what she was about, and in less than two minutes, she had a door braced beneath the doorknob to her bedchamber. Satisfied any assailant would be

unable to enter the room via her bedchamber door without making a lot of noise, she then turned her attention to accessing her husband's room.

His connecting door opened without a single sound and she slipped into the room. After pulling the door closed behind her, she leaned against it and concentrated on regulating her breathing. Her heart pounded like crazy in her chest and she thought for sure it echoed throughout the house, alerting everyone to her location. Finally, her heart rate slowed along with her breathing and she knew she was alone in Darcy's bedchamber. He was still downstairs with Uncle Thomas. Feeling much safer in his room, she padded toward the bed and slipped under the covers on the side that was next to the far wall. She reasoned Darcy would sleep closest to the door, as it was human nature to want an easy escape if needed when in an unfamiliar place, and the bed was large enough and the room

dark enough he would never know she slept beside him. At dawn, she would make her way back to her room and no one would be the wiser.

These thoughts and the sense of feeling safe allowed her to close her eyes and soon she drifted off to sleep.

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After spending a tension filled evening canvassing all sorts of plans and contingencies with Mr. Bennet, Darcy finally made his way upstairs for the night. He passed the guard outside Elizabeth's door.

"Nothing to report, Bellows?" he asked the giant of a man.

"No, sir. All is quiet. I haven't heard a peep from Mrs. Darcy since her maid quit the room."

"Excellent, good evening, then."

He entered his room, feeling rather foolish for wishing he had permission to join her. He

could always slip through the sitting room and knock on her door. He shook his head. No, *that* was foolish. She had gone up a good hour earlier and was surely sound asleep. His head tilted up, like a wolf scenting the air, positive he could smell her perfume. He truly must be going daft with love for he was convinced her unique scent had permeated his own bedchamber.

There was enough light from the waning fireplace that he did not need to light a taper, and his valet had been excused for the evening. He quickly stripped down to bare skin and slid between the freshly laundered sheets, laying on his back, hands behind his head, thinking of Elizabeth. Soon, as it so often occurred, one hand slid beneath the covers to take care of his burgeoning desire. With a familiar dream of him sliding into his wife's welcoming body, he was startled when the blankets on other side of his bed moved and a slender arm was flung out and landed

across his midsection, followed by a soft body which curled into his side like a perfectly fitted puzzle piece.

“Janey, you are unbearably hot,” she mumbled into his chest.

With that, a still sleeping Elizabeth grabbed the covers and threw them off Darcy’s body. Too stunned to move, he released himself and tried to pluck a corner of the sheet back over the lower half of his body. He was not ashamed of his nakedness, but if Elizabeth awakened – and given where her head was located on the lower half of his chest – she’d get an eyeful of a certain part of his body that desperately wanted to know her intimately. Two dilemmas faced him. Covering his body and fighting his libido. He soon realized the battle was being lost on both sides. He could not reach the sheet and little puffs of air from her mouth had him twitching in erotic agony.

She shifted and dragged one leg over his.

Dear God in Heaven. Everything in him

clamored to awaken her and assert his husbandly rights. He began to count backwards from one hundred, in Latin, to take his mind off the supple length of his wife's body wrapped around him. He had reached forty-seven when she moved again, her hand inching dangerously close to...

He would not survive. He would die a painful death with vivid, erotic thoughts on his mind and then spend the rest of eternity in purgatory reliving this moment with no release in sight. What had driven her to sleep in his bed? Surely, she had not come to entice him to consummate their marriage. She would not be encased head to toe in a serviceable nightgown if that had been her mission. No, something else drove her to seek sanctuary in his room. The plans of his aunt had upset Elizabeth more than she let on.

If anything calmed his libido, it was thoughts of Lady Catherine. He cupped Elizabeth's head, holding her close to his

chest, almost groaning aloud at the feel of her soft curls beneath his fingers. As long as he had life in his body, he would protect her.

Determined to keep her safe, even from himself, he finally managed to hook the sheet with his pinkie finger and pulled it up high enough to cover himself fully, although for a good half hour there was still an obvious protrusion making itself known beneath the sheet. He then cradled his diminutive wife as best he could with one hand and finally fell into a light slumber.

He knew not how long he slept, a few hours at most because the room had considerably lightened with the advent of dawn. Elizabeth lay partially curled within the crook of his arm and he slowly opened his eyes, pleased to discover that she was awake and perused his body with a frankness that thrilled him. When her eyes widened and her mouth formed a soft 'o', he realized that another part of his body was awakening and

her attention was riveted on the gently rising sheet. Wondering what she would do, he closed his eyes and pretended to still be asleep. Every now and again he would dare crack one eye open and watch his curious wife. She shifted into a semi sitting position and with great care, lifted the edge of the sheet. He nearly died when she peeled back the cover and with the lightest of touches, feathered a fingernail down the length of him.

He could take no more.

“I hope you are prepared to see your actions through to its finality, Mrs. Darcy.”

“Oh!” she squeaked out in a breathy gasp and scrambled to a sitting position, the sheet falling to cover him again. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I was, but a wood nymph brought me out of the depths of Morpheus into her web of desire and love.”

“I am sorry, Mr. Darcy.”

“I am not, and yesterday you called me

William.”

He thought it not possible, but she blushed an even darker shade of pink. Absolutely delightful.

“I suppose, in a moment of fear, I did call you by your given name, Mr. Darcy.”

“We are past you calling me Mr. Darcy. We are now Elizabeth and William. I will accept nothing less.”

He shifted his pillow and brought himself into a semi-reclining position, bending one knee so that his apparent desire was no longer center stage.

“Very well, *William*.” She studied him with wary eyes. “I had best return to my room before my maid comes in to find me gone and rings the alarm.”

“Why did you come here last night?”

“You will think me foolish.”

“Never. You are not only the most beautiful woman I know, but also one the most intelligent.”

She lowered her eyes and once again her cheeks tinged a deep pink. He could get used to this. Flirting with his wife in bed.

“Once alone in my room, I began to fear shadows. Well, not shadows exactly. My mind began to travel down roads that made me think the guard could be one of the men Lady Catherine hired. It is the perfect disguise, and he would have access to me as he holds the key to my room...” she trailed off and gave him a lopsided, wry smile. “Sounds silly when I say it out loud.”

“Not really. Your premise is sound; however, I know these men were hand picked by my cousin Richard and the only way Lady Catherine would have had prior access to them was if she had crossed the channel, entered the battlefield, and politely asked Napoleon to pause his war for a brief moment while she hired a few men to do her dastardly deed. They are loyal to their colonel first and the King second.”

“Is that not treasonous?”

“Not literally loyal to Richard.

Figuratively speaking. They are members of the Royal Dragoons and returned to England with him after their last battle in Portugal.”

“You are telling me that I am safe to cower in my own bed and not worry about the guard?”

“Absolutely not. The only way you will be safe is when you are tucked up against me. Then, and only then, will you truly survive this ordeal.”

“That is laying it on a bit thick, Mr.—” He lowered his forehead and gave her a look of warning. “...William.” she said with a soft laugh and began to pleat the edge of the sheet, clearly showing her nerves.

“What is bothering you, Elizabeth?”

“I... I believe I should go back to my room, but I am not dressed properly.”

He held back a chuckle and said, “As a gentleman, I would leave the room and allow

you to exit with grace and dignity. Alas,” – he waved his hand to pull her attention to the area under the sheets where the rest of him lay in repose – “I do not wear a nightshirt and you are not prepared, yet, to see me in all my glory.”

“Mr. Darcy! I... I mean, William! For shame.”

“Nay, ‘tis a shame that I must stay here while you scamper across the room and give me much to feed my imagination.”

“You are absolutely wicked.”

“No, I am absolutely in love and this, us in bed together, is my deepest desire.”

Her breathing shallowed and her pupils dilated. Dare he? Dare he ask his wife if she were ready to go a step further. *Fortis Fortuna Adiuvat*, slid through his mind like quicksilver. Fortune Favors the Bold. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain. He shifted until his weight rested on one elbow and with his free hand, reached across to touch her hair,

which spilled down her back and over her shoulder in glorious curls. Twining the end of one curl around his finger, he leaned forward and brought it to his nose, inhaling her distinctive scent of lavender and, he assumed, honeysuckle.

Her breath caught, but she did not move away.

He reached out again, this time curving an arm around her waist to draw her close, urging her to lay down by his side. She did not resist, in fact she even helped him. He lightly skimmed the tips of his fingers to the lace ribbon that held the front of her nightgown closed. Ever so gently he picked one loose end of the ribbon and tugged. Like petals of a flower awakening to the morning sun, the edges of her gown unfurled. Nudging it open further, he leant over and kissed the bare skin of her shoulder. Emboldened by the soft sigh which escaped her mouth, he opened her nightgown further, exposing the soft creamy

skin her breasts.

Not wanting to frighten his innocent wife, he first kissed her eyes, her cheek, the tip of her nose and then pressed his lips against hers. He teased the edges of her mouth, tracing the seam of her lips with his tongue. Without hesitation, she opened and he tentatively slid his tongue into her mouth, deepening the kiss. Small hands crept up over his shoulders and soon, delicate fingers had furrowed a tunnel through his own sleep mussed curls.

Curbing his impatience, he retreated from their kissing and gazed down at Elizabeth, her lips glistening from his attentions. Slowly her eyelids drifted open and she smiled.

“I truly hate to ruin this moment, but do you wish to go further? I fully understand if you wish to leave and wait until we have a better understanding of ourselves.”

She cupped his cheek. “I am ready to be your wife in every way.”

“Thank God!”

Together, they removed her nightgown and soon he lavished attention to the part of her body that he could only dream about before. With a husky groan, he buried his face in the valley between her breasts, rubbing back and forth before drawing a nipple deep into his mouth. She shuddered at his touch and he smiled around the hardened pebble. After a few minutes, he lifted up onto his elbows and drank in the sight of her full breasts swollen from his kisses and dedicated ministrations.

“You have no idea what you do to me. These,” – and he punctuated the word with a kiss on the creamy swell of each breast – “have kept me awake and in a state of agony for months.”

“Aunt Francis told me to lower the neckline of my dress. I would hazard to guess that she knew what she was talking about.”

“Remind me to thank your aunt on the morrow.”

“Today is the morrow.”

Having had enough conversation, he proceeded to make her his wife complete. Soon her body was tightening around him and with powerful thrusts upwards, he surged into her welcoming heat.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Elizabeth awakened to find herself spooned against William, one large hand cupping her breast while he nuzzled her neck. Soon the nuzzling turned to soft kisses and the evidence of his growing arousal made itself known against her buttocks.

“Are you finally awake, sweetheart?” he whispered between kisses.

“Mm hmmm,” she answered with a languorous stretch and flipped over to face him.

He surprised her by kissing her fully on the mouth. Without warning, shouts were heard in the hallway and the bedchamber door was flung open by none other than Richard. William sat up and grabbed the counterpane, tossing it over Elizabeth to hide

her nakedness.

“Darcy! Elizabeth is gone!” Richard cried out, advancing further in the room, clearly not seeing her, huddled beneath the cover.

“Calm yourself, Richard,” William began.

“Calm! Your wife is not in her bedchamber! We must mount a search, immediately!”

“My wife is not lost, she is here. With me.”

Elizabeth sat up, partially lowered the cover, and smiled at her cousin.

“Good morning, Colonel,” she said as Richard stood open mouthed.

“Ye, gods. I think I aged at least ten years.” He quickly strode to the door, calling out into the hall. “Stand down. I have found Mrs. Darcy.” He then came back into the room and stopped cold when William frowned and challenged his continuing presence. She could see when Richard realized, truly, what had occurred. “Oh... ahh... I have... I will see myself out.”

Sporting an adorable shade of red on his cheeks, he did a smart military pivot and stepped out of the room, barking orders for everyone to carry on. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy would come down when they were ready.

She averted her eyes when William quit the bed to make sure the door was locked. Although they had made love a few times before falling asleep, she was not used to seeing her husband's bare form. He stopped and picked up the nightgown and handed it to her before he entered the adjoining wardrobe. He soon reappeared wearing a silk robe and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Good morning," he said and kissed her yet again. She could get used to this. "Can I help you get dressed?"

"Absolutely not. I will never see light of day if I agreed to let you near me again."

"I see no problem with that scenario."

"I do. I have a wedding to attend and must show up wearing a proper dress."

“Elizabeth, you could show up in sackcloth and ashes and I would find you utterly desirable.”

She melted. She absolutely melted. Any morning frost which dared cling to the foundation of Longbourn would have melted away from the heat generated in his gaze. Oh, how she wished they could stay in bed all day, but this was not Darcy House, it was Longbourn and they were not here for carnal pleasure but for Charlotte’s wedding.

“Turn around please, Mr. Darcy,” she said in a brisk voice.

“Are we back to Mr. Darcy again?”

If she didn’t know better, she was sure he was behaving like a child who had their favorite toy taken from them.

“We are, until I am dressed.”

“Then,” he stood and her eyes widened when he let his robe fall to the floor, “I shall have to keep you undressed all day.”

He slid back into bed and proceeded –

gently, because she was a little tender – to show her how much he loved her. It was only when Betty knocked and called through the closed door her bathwater was ready, that they both reluctantly removed themselves from the bed. As she quit the room, she heard William quietly ask Betty if Mrs. Hill could attend him before he had his bath. With a quick, embarrassed curtsy, she hurried off and Elizabeth heard no more because she was rushed to bathe, dress and have her hair pinned in place.

All too soon, she was waving goodbye with the rest of the guests as Charlotte and Mr. Collins left immediately from the steps of Meryton's church. Even though the bride and groom had to leave in order to make good time, Sir William and Lady Lucas invited everyone to return to Lucas Lodge for the wedding breakfast.

No one, other than Uncle Thomas, herself, Mr. Darcy and Richard knew they had given

Mr. Collins a pouch full of money and advised him to take a month-long wedding trip to the Lake District and cautioned him to stop by Darcy House before he returned to Kent. They did not want him accidentally disclosing anything to their aunt of how well protected Elizabeth was. Mr. Collins, to his credit, kept his thanks to a minimum and said repeatedly he had such a high regard for his cousin Elizabeth, that he would do anything to protect her reputation as well as her physical being.

Her husband came alongside and stood near as friends and neighbors came to congratulate her on her own marriage and give them both good wishes for a happy life.

“Thank you, Mrs. Goulding,” Darcy said, surprising Elizabeth with the fact he had remembered the lady’s name. “Elizabeth and I are very glad to be here for her good friend’s wedding.”

And later on, at Lucas Lodge, she heard

him say to Sir William, “You are correct. I am a lucky man indeed to have captured the jewel of Hertfordshire, although I believe I have the better end of that deal. She must live with me.”

The hearty laugh of Sir William was heard by everyone and she continued to be amazed at how light and friendly her husband was. If he had behaved in this manner when he first arrived in Meryton, she would have fallen in love with him back in October. She stopped with a cup of tea halfway to her mouth.

She loved him.

Astonished by this personal epiphany, she dared glance in the direction of her husband and at that exact same moment he looked at her. Their eyes locked and she wondered if her new discovery was lit upon her face because a slight frown creased his forehead before it smoothed and his face was wreathed in a smile so wide, both dimples appeared on his cheeks.

Mercy. How had she never realized how handsome he truly was? Afraid she would spill her tea, her hands had begun to tremble, she placed her teacup and saucer on the table and pressed suddenly clammy hands against the sides of her dress.

“Elizabeth, are you well?”

She looked up to find that her husband had crossed the room and now stood by her side, his achingly handsome face showing concern.

“Yes, I am, thank you.”

“You went so pale, I worried you were thinking about our trip home tomorrow.”

“It has been much on my mind,” she said, thankful to grasp any line of conversation that would not entail her blurting out her new discovery. It was too new. Too raw for words. “I meant to ask earlier, but we had much on our mind,” – here she blushed because her husband gave her a provocative look – “how is it that your cousin was here so early in the

morning? I thought he had gone to London.”

“Firstly, we did not rise early from our bed, as you well know, and secondly, Richard left London before dawn. He reasoned he should be here for the wedding in case Lady Catherine has someone in town who reports the coming and going of guests and such. It is well known he came with us and if he suddenly disappeared, she would know the game was afoot.”

“I cannot think of who would write your aunt.”

“No? Do you not think Sir William, in all of his jovial goodness, would not send a note thanking her for giving his new son time off to marry and in the process tell her of their more illustrious guests? He would not do it out of spite, but of happiness and a little bit of pride.”

“That is true. He would never knowingly hurt a soul.”

“Besides, Richard cannot bear to be parted

from your cousin for longer than a day.”

“That is also true. His regard is returned ten-fold, I assure you.”

“I could not ask for Richard to find happiness with a more deserving woman.”

Impulsively, Elizabeth tilted up on her toes and kissed William’s cheek.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked, his tone bemused.

“For seeing the worth of my cousin and for not thinking yours could do better.”

“Your cousin is a saint among women and will need all of that goodness to deal with my reprobate of a cousin. You should be worrying about her.”

“Janey has a core of iron beneath that soft exterior. She will make an excellent officer’s wife.”

“Richard has hinted he will sell his commission. He has an estate, which he only saw fit to tell me of the same night he disclosed his courtship with your cousin.”

“Such happy news,” she sighed out. “Jane will be pleased.”

“And you? Will you be pleased?”

He looped her arm through his and began to lead her to where her aunt and uncle stood talking to Lady Lucas.

“Very much so. I have a handsome husband and a cousin in love. What more could a girl ask?”

“You find me handsome?”

She was saved having to answer his flirtatious question because they had reached her family.

“Ah, Lizzy. Mr. Darcy. So glad you joined us,” her uncle said in a jovial voice, although Elizabeth detected an undertone of tension threaded in his words. “Sir William has been telling us Lady Catherine sent her regrets. She had planned on attending the wedding but was detained in town for business. She did send her best wishes and a lovely silver soup tureen for the bride and groom. It is tucked

away in their luggage. I guess she forgot she could give it to them when they arrived home.”

“We are so very grateful for Lady Catherine’s thoughtfulness and the gift was much admired before we had to pack it away in Charlotte’s trunk,” Sir William said as he rocked on his heels. “Lady Catherine wrote it was only proper, as she was Mr. Collins’s patroness.”

“My aunt is well known for paying particular attention to all things proper.”

“Was that all Lady Catherine wrote? Did she say if she planned on staying in town long?” Elizabeth asked, keeping her voice calm and warm. “Mr. Darcy and I are traveling home soon and if she condescends to pay our humble home a visit, I wish to be well prepared.”

With a pistol and at least three guards were left unsaid.

“I believe she said she would be there for

about a week and urged me to comfort Mr. Collins that her business might keep her in town longer. Once it was concluded to her satisfaction, she wrote she would be returning in order to begin plans for Miss de Bourgh's upcoming nuptials."

"How lovely for Miss de Bourgh," Elizabeth enthused. "Did Lady Catherine say who the lucky man was. I would assume it would be someone from the surrounding area."

"If I recall correctly, she said it was one of her nephews." Sir William faced her husband. "You must know to whom she referred, Mr. Darcy, or is it a great secret amongst the family?"

"Lady Catherine has a few nephews from her husband's side of the family. I am sure it is to one them she referred."

"Well, since you married the jewel of Hertfordshire, she's been forced to look elsewhere."

William's grip on her arm tightened and she was glad of his sturdy presence. Sir William had no idea how much his information was much needed intelligence.

"How thoughtful of Mr. Darcy's aunt to send a gift and letter once she knew she had business elsewhere. Did she say when she was traveling to town? Again, I ask so that I might prepare for her visit." Elizabeth said with a disarming smile.

"The gift was sent by express this very morning. My understanding is that she is in town as we speak.

She turned that same smile onto her husband.

"How delightful, Mr. Darcy. We can expect your aunt sooner than we thought."

By this time Richard and Jane had come alongside.

"What is this about our aunt?" he asked.

"Lady Catherine is in town, sooner than expected. We were just thanking Sir William

for advising us so that we could be prepared.”

Elizabeth gave Richard credit for not missing a beat when he turned to Sir William and asked, “Did she say where she was staying while in town? I know her townhouse is under renovations and my mother and father are in the country. Did she say which friend she was staying with. I am sure Darcy will extend his aunt the courtesy of staying with him once he is back in town.”

“I do not recall a return address on the letter or gift...” Sir William trailed off but then brightened. “However, the rider who brought the express is still here. We offered him some of the food from the wedding breakfast as he had to let his horse rest before returning. He will surely know where your aunt is staying.”

“I am sure it is Lady Hortencia’s house,” Elizabeth offered, keeping up the ruse. “They are such good friends.”

“I would like to speak with the lad, if you don’t mind, Sir William,” Richard said and

took the gentleman's arm, guiding out of the room.

Elizabeth shared a look with her husband before saying quietly, "I believe we should return to Longbourn and make plans."

They all agreed and as soon as it was polite to do so, the Bennet family along with Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy made their way to Longbourn. Within the hour, Richard joined them and the men left for uncle's study. Not wishing to alarm her Aunt Francis, Elizabeth stated she would start packing so that they could leave on the morrow. She cleared the room, hurried down the hall and slipped into her uncle's study.

"What did you discover?"

~ ~ ~

The ride back to Longbourn was short and lively with Mrs. Bennet enthusing about the wedding, the food, the guests and their attire and the amount of lace on the bride's dress.

Once they reached the manor and had disembarked, all the ladies went on to the parlor while the men headed straight for the study. Darcy knew by the look his wife gave him that she wanted to be with them and not left out of what was being planned. He understood her desire, but it was imperative they began strategizing immediately.

With that in mind, he asked Richard bluntly what he had been told by the express rider. His wife's uncle forestalled Richard from answering.

"You may as well wait, son. No sense in telling the tale twice," Bennet advised. At their blank looks, he chuckled. "Do you think Lizzy will stay in the parlor with the womenfolk?"

He shook his head and sure enough, within less than a minute Elizabeth slid into the room, quiet as a wraith. Her first words were, "What did you discover?"

"The rider was to find out how long you plan to stay in Hertfordshire, but he was so

hungry he forgot to ferret that information out.”

“Surely he was expected to return to Lady Catherine and report his findings?”

“He was, but I offered him a better return if he took an express to Derbyshire for me.”

“Derbyshire!”

“I sent him off with a letter to Mrs. Reynolds and said he need not kill his horse getting there and gave him plenty of money for inns and stables. I suspect he will take about four days to get there and then another four to return.”

“What in the world did you say to Mrs. Reynolds?”

“That you were doing well and would probably not return to Pemberley until late August and to give him a bed for the night before he was sent off again.”

All four of them began to laugh. Finally, they settled down and Darcy had to ask, “But what of Lady Catherine. She will expect the

rider to return and give a full report.”

Richard leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over his knee.

“As you know, Lady Catherine does not look at her servants. All she will remember is that he was a slight lad with sandy colored hair. Mr. Bennet here has a stable boy with the same build and coloring. He will tell her that Darcy and Elizabeth are remaining in Hertfordshire for a few more days, returning next Tuesday. We leave tonight and will be at Darcy House before dawn. She will not know we are back in town.”

“When we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.”

Elizabeth said softly into the ensuing silence.

“Lady Catherine will not know where we are or what we are doing. It is wise that she thinks we are ignorant and happy, exposing our soft

bellies to her blade, when in fact we are lying in wait for her to walk into our ambush.”

“My thoughts exactly, Cousin Elizabeth. I have also sent an express to my men in London and they are to watch her house. Before Tuesday, I will have father take her into his custody. She will have no chance to warn her men. If we have not discovered their identities before next week, they will be caught red-handed and will swing.”

“That would expose your family.” Mr. Bennet protested. “The scandal would destroy their reputations.”

“I did not say they would be arrested. I said they would die.”

“I do not know if I could live with the blood of their deaths on my hands.”

Elizabeth sat twisting her fingers together in her lap. Without thought, Darcy reached over and covered her hands with his and gave a comforting squeeze.

“Their blood would be on my hands,

Elizabeth,” Richard said, “mingling with all the others I have had to dispatch in my career.”

“Lizzy,” Bennet said, hesitating slightly. “These men have no heart, no moral code. You have no idea what they planned.”

“But I do, uncle. I am very aware of what Lady Catherine expected of them.”

Bennet cast a furious glance in his direction.

“I found I could not lie to my wife, sir. She deserved to know.” Darcy said, his chin held high in defiance.

“Could we not have them deported?”

“Do you think they would become model citizens the minute they step on foreign soil?” Bennet said in a hard voice. “I know you find this distasteful, Elizabeth, but you must see reason. These men do not care who they hurt and deporting them only places them in the vicinity of other innocent victims. We cannot take the easy way out.”

“Wait a minute,” Richard broke in. “Elizabeth may have the right of it. What about impressment?”

“You mean to press gang them into service?”

“Exactly. It is a hard life and we are at war. Best of all, they would be separated from one another. I have many contacts within the Navy. It can be easily done.”

Later that night, after Elizabeth had returned to visit with her aunt and cousins, Bennet poured them each a drink.

“We are fortunate Sir William is so garrulous.” Darcy said. “Without his telling us of our aunt’s generosity, we might not have discovered where she was hiding.”

“He is also without guile.” Bennet said and leaned back in his chair. “Before his knighthood, it was what made him a successful business man. He was honest to a fault.”

“Here’s to honest people.” Richard raised

his drink in a toast.

“Here, here.” Bennet and Darcy raised their glasses in tandem.

Once their drinks were finished, Richard went to the stables to prepare their rider for his errand. They all agreed to find their beds sooner rather than later as Richard wanted to be on the road around four o'clock in the morning. This way they could be in London before nine. Bennet had the daunting task of explaining why the three of them and all the guards would have stolen away in the night and to try and curb his wife's tongue from flapping in the wrong direction. At dawn, he came up with the idea the whole family would take a trip to Bath and in the ensuing chaos after his declaration over the breakfast table, Mrs. Bennet barely even gave Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy and the colonel another thought. At Jane's panicked expression, Mr. Bennet told her she would stay with the Gardiner's for the interim.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“How did you know I was in residence?”

Lady Catherine demanded imperially upon entry into the drawing room of Matlock House and spied her brother, the earl, seated in a comfortable chair by the fireplace.

“I have made it a habit to drive by your townhouse, sister, in order to ensure no ruffians or malcontents have broken in. It is common knowledge you rarely attend us here in London. When I saw smoke coming from the chimneys, I knew you must in town and thought to invite you so we can discuss Anne’s future.”

“I have Anne’s future well in hand, there is no need to discuss anything.” Catherine claimed the chair opposite her brother, settled her skirts about her legs and rested her hand

on the head of her cane. "In fact, I am here to shop for her trousseau."

"Anne is betrothed?" The earl straightened somewhat, feigning ignorance of his sister's plans. "To whom? When did she become engaged?"

"Her plans are fluid at this moment. I am hoping they can marry within the month, but if needs must, she is willing to wait longer."

"Seven years longer?"

The earl leaned back in his chair, having seen Richard's men take position at all the exits of the room. Catherine's eyes narrowed and she gripped her cane tighter. He knew when she'd realized she was trapped in the room and almost caught him by surprise when she leapt to her feet, swinging her cane at his head.

"I hate you, you damnable man! It should have been me who was born the earl!" She flailed and swung while Richard's men subdued her and took her cane, breaking it in

two. “I would have known how to run this family.”

Darcy and Richard entered the drawing room, followed by the earl’s own physician who hurried forward and had the men hold her head back so he could pour a drink, laced with laudanum, down her gullet. The drink took a while to become fully effective and during that time, Lady Catherine abused the earl, she denounced every member of his family, and snarled at Darcy that she would torture and kill Elizabeth Bennet with her own hands. When she finally became still and no longer needed to be held down, the earl wept over her quiet body.

“We failed you, Catherine. I should never have let you get this far along in your delusions.”

“I believe we all failed her, Uncle. None of us were willing to confront her behavior,” Darcy said as he and Richard came alongside.

“I shall fetch Anne. She is probably at

Aunt Catherine's townhouse."

The earl nodded his approval at Richard's suggestion.

"My physician wishes to give her a complete physical. I do not trust the quacks Catherine most likely hired because they told her what she wanted to hear."

"I must return to Darcy House and inform Elizabeth that Lady Catherine has been subdued."

"Remember to exit through the servant's entrance. We do not want anyone to know you are here."

"Thank you for the reminder. By habit I might have walked out in full view of everyone. I will meet you and Richard at the designated place tomorrow morning."

"Give Elizabeth our love."

"With much pleasure, uncle."

Both Darcy and Richard removed themselves from the room and the earl signaled his men to bind Lady Catherine and

begin the journey to his estate in Derbyshire, Wyndhaven Castle, where his eldest sister would live out her days in confinement, hopefully not drugged all the time, but he would not know how that would go until they arrived.

Darcy and Richard slipped out the back gate that led by the mews and taking the lanes between the back of grand estates made his way to the corner where Darcy's driver, Wilkes waited with a non-descript carriage.

"Are you coping, Darcy?" Richard asked once the carriage was under way. They would take Darcy home first and then his cousin would continue on to Lady Catherine's townhouse. "I will admit I was taken aback over her hatred of Elizabeth, even knowing the plans she'd set in motion."

Darcy pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt to stave off a tension headache.

"Since father died, over six years ago, I have repeatedly told her I would not marry

Anne. She made both our lives miserable by regurgitating that myth every time I was in her presence, and seemed to have no qualms over taking the life of a woman she has never met.” He shook his head and looked out the window. “I will never understand how she could be related to my mother and your father. She is so very different.”

“At least we found out about her plans before implementation. I give Collins’s credit for letting us know. He seemed as though he were completely under the thrall of our aunt.”

“I will never acknowledge her as my aunt. She is Lady de Bourgh to me and has no connection to my family in any form. Not any longer.”

“Father will have his hands full with her at Wyndhaven. There are fortified rooms from medieval times and hidden tunnels from the times of Queen Mary’s reign of terror on those not of the Catholic faith. Aunt..., Lady de Bourgh will be comfortable but highly

dissatisfied with not being able to order everyone to obey her commands.”

“I have no sympathy for her plight. At least she is alive which is something she did not wish on my wife.”

“We are here,” Richard said and the carriage rolled to a stop at the back of Darcy House. “I will see you tomorrow at the designated spot.”

“Is Bennet here with the decoy?”

“He dropped the lad and Jane off this morning at the Gardiners on their way to Bath.”

“Bath!”

“He is keeping the missus distracted so gossip will not filter out of Meryton.”

“It seems strategic and tactical intelligence runs in the Bennet family.”

“That is does.” Richard paused before closing the carriage door. “Do you think Jane is capable of planning something like this?”

“I guess you will find out on your wedding

night.”

“Speaking of wedding nights, and I apologize now for the way I barged in on you and your lovely wife, how are things between you and Elizabeth?”

Darcy knew his cheeks heated and felt like a school boy caught kissing his very first girl.

“Things are progressing. I believe she no longer hates me.”

“I would hope not, unless that is the spice you need to make the marriage bed interesting.”

“I will thank you to not speak of our intimate relations in such a cavalier manner. Remember, the boot could soon be on the other foot and I might begin to look into your romance with my sister by marriage.”

“Come down off your high horse. I am very glad you and Elizabeth have declared a truce. By the by, when Jane and I marry, I would like you to stand with me.”

“You do not wish your brother to have the

honor?”

“You are more my brother than Ash, and I also am keeping Jane away from my reprobate of a brother until after the wedding. I swear, if he catches even a glimpse of her, he will haul her off to Gretna Green, willing or not. He is to be kept in the dark about all this until it is too late.”

“You realize Jane will be at your parent’s house for Elizabeth’s presentation ball. Ash will meet her then.”

“Damn, you are correct. I wonder if I should apply for a special license.”

They were approaching Darcy’s house and the carriage had begun to slow.

“Do not underestimate Jane. She knows what she wants and will not be swayed by your fickle brother,” he said as the carriage stopped and he stepped out. “Trust her, Richard. Learn from my mistakes.”

With that, Darcy swung the door closed and stepped back as the carriage lurched

forward down the lane and out of sight. He then opened the hidden gate on the back of his property and made his way to the servant's entrance of the house, which caused him to pass by the kitchen. A familiar laugh had him pause, and he came to a complete stop at the sight of Elizabeth standing at the work table, rolling out some dough with a splotch of flour on her cheek.

She looked up and smiled.

“You are just in time. These cookies will be ready for tea in about half an hour.”

~ ~ ~

Unable to sit still while William attended to matters at his uncle's house, with knowledge of their plans to confront Lady Catherine and whisk her off to Derbyshire, Elizabeth paced back and forth in front of the fireplace in the library. Normally, she would walk off her frustration outside, but she couldn't take the risk the house was being

watched and the hired thugs might snatch her off the street before their plan was enacted. So, in frustration she wore down the thread of the plush Aubusson carpet.

She stopped a few feet from the window, a little to the left of the drapes and tried to peer across the street, hoping she could see if anyone *was* watching the house. All her efforts were for naught. Only carriages and tradespeople going about their business.

“This is ridiculous,” she finally said to nothing but air. “I will go mad!”

She turned on her heel and made her way to the kitchen. At Longbourn, when she was unable to curb her nervous energy by walking, she would go to the kitchen and help Cook with the baking. Nothing made her feel better than to knead the dough for a delicious loaf of bread, or work some batter for sweet cookies. Upon entry into the inner sanctum of Cook, known as Mrs. Pennyroyal, everyone looked at her in askance.

“Please, bear me no mind,” she urged and approached Cook. “I know the lady of the house does not come into the kitchen looking for employment or something to do with her hands, but I am beyond distraction and growing up, helping in the kitchen was my way of taking my mind off of things.”

Cook continued to stare without saying a word.

“I will not get in your way, I do know my way around a mixing bowl,” she continued to assure the gobsmacked woman. Seeing that she would get no response, she heaved a sigh and began to turn in order to leave the room.

“There be flour on the far shelf an’ measurin’ cups below. I’ll need about four cups for dem cookies ya like ta eat wit’ yer tea. Ye ken start wit’ dat.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Pennyroyal.”

She found the mixing bowl, measuring cups and flour and before she knew it, she was rolling out dough and cutting cookie shapes,

joking and laughing with the ladies in the kitchen, telling them stories of her cousins and life at Longbourn. It was then that her husband returned from Matlock House. She looked up and smiled, holding back laughter at his surprised expression.

“You are just in time. These cookies will be ready for tea in about half an hour.”

One of the kitchen maids tapped her arm and with a nod of her head indicated she would take over and that she should go with her husband – their employer. Elizabeth handed over the cookie cutter and moved to the sink where a bowl of water sat. She quickly washed her hands and quietly accepted a clean cloth another maid handed her in order to dry her hands. With a pat to her bun, to ensure no curls had escaped, she moved forward and slid her arm around William’s, looking up at him to say, “Would you kindly escort me to the drawing room?”

“I would, but you forgot something.”

At first, she was alarmed at his formal tone and worried the women in the kitchen would get in trouble by her impromptu baking session. Becoming apprehensive over his continued silence, she gave a start when he pulled his own linen handkerchief from his pocket and gently wiped her cheek, before kissing her on the forehead.

“We cannot have you frighten Burke and Mrs. Whittaker with flour on your face. It is imperative we keep this little secret amongst ourselves.”

She pressed a little closer to his body and grinned when the cook harrumphed behind them.

“The likes of us will no’ tell tales, Mr. Darcy. Yer wife’s a right pip and she’s welcome in my kitchen any time.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Pennyroyal. Would you have someone bring tea when it is ready to the yellow drawing room.”

They walked in amicable silence toward

what was becoming one of her favorite rooms. Most likely because it was smaller and more intimate. She was bursting with curiosity over what transpired at Matlock House but knew she had to wait until they were alone.

They sat together on one of the smaller settees, a fact which pleased her to no end, and she began to pepper him with questions. He raised his hands in mock surrender after a few minutes.

“Elizabeth! Take a breath and let me answer at least one of your questions before you launch another one.”

“I am sorry, William. I hate not being in the mix of things and my imagination, if you are not already aware, is quite active. I had several scenarios running about in a continual loop. None of them pleasant, I assure you.”

“There really is not much to say. Lady de Bourgh,” – he ignored his wife’s raised brow at the name he now ascribed to his aunt – “was subdued with little effort and she is now on

her way to Wyndhaven Castle where uncle has employed an army of servants to ensure hers and our safety.” Nothing would induce him to tell his wife the invectives his despicable aunt had spewed out as she was forcibly confined and drugged.

“I would assume, now that Lady de Bourgh has been successfully muzzled, we do not need to hide our presence in London move forward with the second act of this play?”

“Yes. Bennet has safely delivered Jane and the boy to the Gardiners.”

Her brow furrowed.

“Jane is in town?”

“Your uncle Bennet decided to take the whole family to Bath and Jane did not wish to be parted from a certain cousin of mine.”

“Bath! Uncle has never wanted to go to Bath. He has always said it is a place where people with no brains go to drink brackish water in the vain hope it will cure all their ills.”

“Primarily, he needed to distract his wife from asking why you and I, along with Richard left so early without so much as a fond farewell. He suggested a holiday in Bath, because your aunt and youngest cousin have always expressed a desire to go sea-bathing. Also, he needed a valid reason for coming to London in order to drop off the lad who agreed to act as decoy.”

They had barely taken their seats when Burke opened the door and announced, “Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, and Miss Bennet.”

“Thank you, Burke,” Fitzwilliam said. “Please let Mrs. Whittaker know there are three more for tea this afternoon.”

“We were not expecting you.” She looked to Uncle Gardiner while Jane sat in the chair closest to her. “Why have you come now? Everything is set for tomorrow.”

“Richard suggested we bring Jeb tonight so that he is on the premises. This way, if anyone is watching the house, there will not

be unexpected activity tomorrow morning before your normal walking hour.”

“You are not worried they will notice one of your servants is not with you when you leave?”

“Lizzy, truthfully – who notices the servants?”

“A sad but true observation.” She brightened as the door opened and the tea cart was wheeled in. “Thank you, Mrs. Whittaker.”

The housekeeper acknowledged her mistress with a polite smile, which actually met her eyes this time, and Elizabeth felt a moment of small satisfaction. She waited until the door had closed and the family was left alone before she brought up the next point which worried her to no end.

“What if they do not take the bait?”

“We will repeat the procedure the next day, and the next. We know it will be this week, we just do not know the day.” William said and reached for one of the cookies she

had made. She noted the kitchen had put them on a very elaborate plate and knew they were trying to mark this occasion. Jane also placed a cookie on her own plate.

“Given the men are still operating under her original orders and plans, and Lady de Bourgh’s impatience for any task she sets before her inferiors, I can almost guarantee these men will make note of where Elizabeth walks and her behavior patterns the first day and implement their plan the second day – weather permitting. They do not want to be seen loitering about the park.”

“It would not surprise me in the least if one of their men appears as a gentleman. What better way to get a closer look at our niece without giving rise to suspicion?”

“Jeb will have to keep his chin down and the bonnet secure. We will have to tie the ribbon in such a way as to hide his Adam’s apple.” Aunt Madeline said and Elizabeth appreciated her practical side making its

appearance.

“Lizzy,” Jane said suddenly and Elizabeth worried that her sweet cousin was becoming overwhelmed by all the talk of nefarious men and dark deeds. She reached over and placed her hand on Jane’s as a form of comfort.

“Are you uncomfortable with this discussion?”

“What? Oh! – No. No, indeed.” Jane looked around at all the expectant faces and then covered her mouth with her fingers. Her eyes sparkled with humor. “Did you know these cookies taste just like the ones our cook makes?”

“Oh, Janey.” Elizabeth impulsively leaned over and gave her a quick hug. “They should as it is Mrs. Pruitt’s very own recipe, I used this afternoon.”

“You made them?” Jane asked.

“I could not bear not knowing what was going on and had to do something with my hands as I could not go for a walk, and you

know how I pestered Mrs. Pruitt on rainy days to take me in hand.”

“Yes, I do know. You will be pleased to know that Mary has begun learning how to make your bread recipe. She missed the loaves with the raisins in them.”

“Mm... that was a mistake which had a delicious ending.”

They finished their tea and Jane and the Gardiner’s stayed to dine. All too soon they were left alone and William asked her if she would play for him before they retired for the night. She knew he was worried about the next chapter in this nightmare and made the decision to play music to sooth. She began by playing Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 14. William joined her on the piano bench and as she played, he gently pushed aside some errant wisps of curls and kissed the spot where her neck met her shoulder.

Her fingers stumbled at times, and when he nudged the edge of her gown aside and

undid the buttons on the back of her dress so that it gaped slightly, allowing him access to the portion of her body she knew he had a fascination with, she gave up completely and turned in his arms.

He slanted his mouth over hers and drove all sane thought from her mind. Reluctantly he dragged his mouth from hers and touched her forehead with his.

“May I come to you tonight?” he asked, his voice deep and hoarse.

“Yes,” she whispered as he took her mouth once more with his.

Reluctantly, they broke apart and made their way to their respective bedchambers.

~ ~ ~

In a move which surprised them all, the hired men attacked ‘Elizabeth’ the first morning. In relating the story to family, the next afternoon, Darcy kept the talk of violence to a minimum, but to his uncle, the earl, he

repeated the full story.

At the first large grouping of shrubbery on the walking path, Jeb was grabbed from behind and a foul-smelling cloth was pressed against his nose and mouth. He instinctively held his breath and managed to wiggle so that his nose was no longer covered. He felt a bit woozy, but managed to stay alert although he pretended to fall into a faint.

He was carted off to a large carriage. Only one of the hired men entered with him and soon they were off, careening down the road on their way to their hide-out. Richard, Darcy and Richard's men followed at a distance. Unbeknownst to them and the hired thugs, Jeb had several knives strapped to his inner thighs and being a strong young lad – well-used to working hard in the stables as well as being an avid hunter – he dispatched the thug in the carriage without the man making a sound. Darcy did not think he needed to tell the ladies that Jeb had sliced the man's vocal

cords before he even knew what was going on.

Jeb then commandeered the man's pistols, made sure they were ready for firing, and waited for the carriage to stop. Only once did he have a tremor of fear and that was when one of the men called out to make sure all was well within the carriage.

Jeb had lowered his voice and called back, "She's out like a light." He had dared not say more in case they realized the voice was different. After riding for an hour, and having turned off the main road, they had come to what looked like an abandoned farm.

Darcy told his family that once they realized they were headed for this farm, Richard had his men fan out and ordered them to approach from all sides, to ensure no one escaped. Then he, Richard and five soldiers followed the carriage, trying their best to stay out of sight. They had just crested a ridge, where the road led down to the house proper, when shots rang out and chaos erupted

outside the carriage. Jeb had taken down two of the men, proving that he was a *very* good shot and, in the pandemonium, Richard's men effectively subdued the remaining scum. These three ne'er do wells would not see dry land for many weeks following their impressment.

Both the earl and Darcy, so pleased with young Jeb, rewarded him with a small estate near Meryton and five thousand pounds to get him started. Elizabeth knew Jeb had a sweetheart in one of the maids at Lucas Lodge and had always wanted a farm of his own. She wished him well and told him she expected an invite to his wedding. He had blushed furiously at her gentle tease, but promised he would not forget. He then shook William's hand and thanked him most profusely for his generosity.

"Nonsense, Jeb. Without you, I may have lost my Elizabeth and she is more precious than rubies and all the things I may desire cannot compare to her."

“Miss Lizzy... pardon... Mrs. Darcy’s respected by all who know her, sir. I couldna lived wif myself iff I didna help.”

Both she and William stood on the steps of Darcy House and watched until the carriage taking Jeb to Longbourn turned the corner and disappeared. Finally, she could breathe easy and enjoy being Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy. Well, she could breathe easy once her presentation was over, and she met the patronesses of Almack’s and gained their approval. Then..., she huffed out a little happy sigh, in a little over three months, they were off to Pemberley!

Her attention was diverted when William turned her around and led her into the house, straight up the stairs into his bedchamber and she did not see the lower level of the house for almost a week. Not that she was complaining. Not by a long shot.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Somewhere, somehow, Mrs. Darcy, we are related. The royal families of Europe are all interconnected. Please keep us advised of how your family grows. We will send an invitation for tea before you head back to Derbyshire for the summer.”

With a deep curtsy and a murmured, “Thank you, your Majesty,” Elizabeth slowly backed out of the room, mindful of the stares and murmurs from the surrounding courtiers. It was only when they had successfully entered the anteroom and she could walk in a normal fashion did Aunt Lucinda take hold of her hand and squeeze.

“Oh! you darling girl! Nothing can stop you from taking society by storm. The Queen’s approbation will be talked about for months!”

She looped her arm through Elizabeth's and together they walked to the waiting carriage. Her aunt by marriage chattered gaily the whole way home, yet she processed none of the conversation. She had met the Queen. The Queen! She, Elizabeth Rose Isabella de Cortez Bennet Darcy met and spoke with Her Royal Highness, Queen Charlotte! Never in her wildest dreams had she ever thought such a thing possible. And to be invited to tea. She was glad she was seated in the carriage because she was sure her knees would give out and she'd tumble into a large pile of white silk, with hoops flinging her underskirts into the air.

She burst out laughing at the image.

"Elizabeth?" Lady Matlock asked, her voice curious.

"Forgive me, Aunt. I had visions of losing my balance and the image of these hoops flying into the air seemed ludicrously funny. I apologize over not attending fully to our

conversation.”

“No forgiveness required, dear girl. You have had a harrowing few months and are allowed to vent a little excess energy.” Her lips quirked upward. “However, it would be funny if you were to fall. Those hoops are a menace to polite society. I am not sure why Queen Charlotte clings to such old-fashioned etiquette.”

“Mayhap, with all the rumors and innuendos surrounding her husband and son, this is one thing she can control.”

Lady Matlock assessed her with new understanding. “At times, Elizabeth, I think you are older than your years. That very well could be true.”

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes and Elizabeth became lost in her thoughts.

“You look tired, my dear.”

“Between fittings and teas and balls, I feel like I have not had one spare minute to just

breathe. I fear William has forgotten what I look like.”

“Of that, I highly doubt. You will be glad to know that after our dinner tonight, followed by your presentation ball and of course, tea with the Queen, you and William along with Georgiana are free to escape to Derbyshire.”

“I look forward to seeing William’s home. I have yet to meet anyone who does not like it.”

“As partial as I am to Wyndhaven Castle, there is something in the air around Pemberley. There is such a peace about it. His mother, Lady Anne, swore that she only married George Darcy so she could call Pemberley her home.”

“No!”

“I tease, Elizabeth. She and George were a hard-won love match. One day, you will have to ask William about their courtship. It has many parallels to your own.”

“I have yet to receive a courtship, Aunt Lucinda. I literally fell into marriage.”

“You cannot tell me your husband has not been courting you these past months. You may be married, but he is besotted and looks to find ways to please you. He spent weeks scouring the lady’s shops on Bond Street to find a particular perfume you like to wear.”

Elizabeth laughed lightly. “He was very upset to discover my scent is a concoction that Jane and I have always prepared ourselves in Longbourn’s stillroom. He has made me promise to make it once I am set up at Pemberley.”

“I did not know you had a talent for mixing scents. I should have you make me something. I have always liked what you wear.” Lady Matlock held out her wrist and invited Elizabeth to sniff. “What think you? Could you make something similar?”

Elizabeth drew in air and then pulled away, putting her hand to her mouth because

she felt as though she were about to cast up her accounts.

“My dear, whatever is wrong?”

“I do not know. I think my nerves have finally gotten the best of me.”

Their carriage slowed to a stop in front of Darcy House.

“I insist you lay down and have a nice nap before dinner. We cannot have the lady of the hour looking like she hasn’t slept a wink in months.”

Elizabeth prepared to exit the carriage and squeezed her aunt’s arm.

“Thank you for all your support. Today, as well as in the past.” She accepted the aid of the footman who helped her disembark amidst her hoops and yards and yards of material. “I will see you tonight, Aunt Lucinda.”

“Rest easy dear girl. Drive on,” Lady Matlock said and the carriage lurched forward.



Darcy searched the drawing room upon entry, feeling a surge of love and energy when his eyes finally lighted upon Elizabeth. The gentlemen were joining the ladies after enjoying an after-dinner drink and he had had more than one man clap him on the back, congratulating him on capturing the attention of such a lovely, accomplished woman for his wife.

His gaze lovingly caressed her rounded cheeks, pausing in concern at the slight exhaustion and paleness which she had done her best to hide with the merest hint of rouge. Another thing he appreciated about his Elizabeth. She did not feel the need to paint her cheeks and lips to be beautiful. Still, he was glad after tonight they were that much closer to their return to Derbyshire where they could throw off the mantle of polite behavior and truly relax and his bride could walk to her heart's content through the wooded paths of Pemberley.

Like a moth to flame, he moved to stand beside her, quietly enjoying the conversation she was having with Lord Blake, a friend of his from Cambridge days.

“Do not let this tall rascal tell you he spends all his time behind his desk. I know for a fact he is an avid horseman and even though he grimaces at each and every ball he attends, he is an excellent dancer.”

“Lord Blake, I am well aware my husband is light on his feet. I am a lucky woman indeed in the fact that my partner in life is also my favorite partner on the dance floor. He covers for my missteps with nary a raised brow.”

Lord Blake was about to speak again when Uncle Robert cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention.

“We are all gathered here tonight to celebrate the presentation of our niece, Elizabeth Darcy. Lucinda and I cannot begin to tell you how proud we are of her and Darcy and wish nothing but the best for them in

their future.” He raised his glass and amidst cheers of ‘here, here’, everyone toasted Elizabeth and Darcy. Before anyone could resume their conversations, he cleared his throat again. At their confused looks he smiled wide. “I also have the joy of announcing the betrothal of my son Richard to Elizabeth’s cousin, Miss Jane Bennet.” He turned to face the happy couple and continued with his monologue. “Never did we think that William’s good luck would bring such a woman, who is beautiful inside and out, into the life of our second son. Thank you for putting him out of his misery Jane by saying yes. We could not have survived him if you had declined.”

Once again, the guests raised their flutes and glasses and toasted the newly engaged couple. Jane blushed a becoming shade of pink, further deepened when her betrothed kissed her on the cheek. Darcy’s heart overflowed with happiness for his favorite

cousin and also his cousin by marriage. They would have a wonderful life together, and with Richard's estate only thirty miles from Pemberley, keeping a close-knit friendship would not be difficult.

"Are there any other Bennet ladies left in Hertfordshire?" Lord Blake teased Elizabeth when the toasts were complete.

Darcy's attention flicked back to his wife, awaiting her answer, which he was sure would be playful and teasing.

"There are four, my lord." At his obvious interest she continued, "There is my Aunt Francis, but she is well married to my uncle," Lord Blake rolled his eyes at her tease – "then there is Catherine and Lydia, but they are not yet out, leaving Mary, who will be nineteen this summer."

"Nineteen, eh?"

"Yes, nineteen with absolutely no desire to come to London, or leave Hertfordshire at all. I am afraid you will have to look elsewhere for

a bride, Lord Blake.”

“My eye had been caught by your eldest cousin, but that reprobate colonel had already scooped her up.” Blake said with a slight nod in the direction of Jane and Richard.

“Richard knew he had to mark his territory before the Viscount laid eyes on her.” Darcy informed his friend. “He was quite worried over all the other pups fighting over his bone.”

Elizabeth rounded on him and tapped him hard with her fan.

“Did you just liken my cousin to a dog’s favorite bone?”

For a moment he worried he had offended his wife. Her mood over the past few weeks had been mercurial, vacillating between giddy relief to tears over the smallest slight. Another reason for his desire that they retreat to Pemberley and move forward with a normal, happy marriage. About to stammer out an apology, he noticed the twinkle in her eye and

let out the breath he did not realize he'd been holding.

“Elizabeth. It is the dog’s *favorite* bone. One that he, and he alone may enjoy.”

“And am I your favorite bone, Mr. Darcy?”

Oh, he would show her later tonight just how much he enjoyed his favorite bone, but for now Lord Blake watched them with a very knowing look and was well aware of how their conversation had begun to take a double meaning. Darcy did not want to embarrass Elizabeth and so he kept the conversation light.

“You will always be my delight and happiness. Shall we go and congratulate our cousins?”

At her happy nod he offered his arm and they excused themselves from Lord Blake’s company. As they walked across the room, he leaned in and whispered in his wife’s ear.

“Later tonight, I will bring out *your* favorite bone and we shall see who is happy by night’s

end.”

Her ensuing gasp and blush almost had him take her up in his arms, and rush for the bedchamber they were staying in that night at Matlock House, guests be damned. Her fingers tightened on his arm and her breathing became choppy. When she looked up at him, eyes darkened by desire, he very nearly put his reckless plan into motion. It was the voice of Richard which pulled him out of his lust filled daze.

“I say, Elizabeth. You look absolutely ravishing.” His cousin stepped closer and his low voice halted his thoughts. “Get a hold of yourself, man. Your sister is in this very room.”

The thought of Georgiana seeing him behave so recklessly in public doused his desire more effectively than dumping cold water over his head. He maintained Elizabeth’s hand on his arm, and put all carnal thoughts to the back of his mind, ready to be

released later that night in the privacy of their bedchamber. Turning to Jane, he congratulated her.

“Let me congratulate you, Jane. I am not sure exactly when you bumped your head and lost all sense of reasoning. There can be no accounting as to why you would accept this reprobate.” He grinned at his lovely cousin, who stared at him wide-eyed. “But I do know, you make that reprobate very happy and he has sung your praises from the time he first met you. I wish you nothing but joy.”

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy,” Jane began but he interrupted her.

“We are family in more ways than one now. I insist you call me William or Darcy. Whichever you feel most comfortable.”

“Then, I thank you William.”

Their conversation turned to mundane topics until it was time to form the receiving line for Elizabeth’s ball.

“Are you nervous?” he asked her when the

first set of guests came up the staircase.

“Yes and no. I hate being the center of attention, but am so glad this is the penultimate occasion before we leave for Derbyshire. I also cannot wait to dance the first set with my handsome husband.”

The next hour was busy as friends and colleagues made their way through the receiving line, all wanting to see the woman who had captured the elusive bachelor Mr. Darcy and who had also received an invitation to visit with the Queen during her presentation.

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“His Royal Highness, Prince Augustus, Duke of Sussex.”

All conversation ceased as the prince entered the ballroom; his retinue of followers at a respectful distance. Lord and Lady Matlock immediately moved toward him, Elizabeth and Darcy close behind. The ladies

curtsied deeply and the men performed low courtier bows.

“Your Highness, thank you for attending our ball.”

“Her Majesty asked that we come and acknowledge our newest cousin.” Prince Augustus turned his attention toward the earl. “Lord Matlock, would you kindly perform the introduction.”

“With pleasure, Sir.” Lord Matlock held out his hand to Elizabeth and she slid her hand into his, allowing him to draw her closer to the prince. “Your Highness, it is with great pleasure that I present you to my niece, Mrs. Elizabeth de Cortez Bennet Darcy.”

“Mrs. Darcy, the pleasure is fully mine. May I enquire if your first set is available?”

She didn’t, but surely her husband would not mind her forfeiting his set to a prince.

“I do believe it is already spoken for.” The royal duke’s eyes widened in disbelief and she hastened to add. “By a very handsome prince

who has graced our ballroom.”

“I can see why Mother was so taken with you.” He smiled wide at her flattery and crooked his elbow to escort her to the head of the line forming on the dance floor. “May your feet be as light as your wit and your marriage as delightful as your intelligence.”

“Thank you, your Highness,” she demurred with a slight bow of her head. “I am determined to be happy with my choices and just as determined to enjoy my dance with you.”

Prince Augustus leaned forward as though imparting a great secret. “Be thankful it was me who came tonight as I am a wonderful dancer. My brothers, –” he gave an elegant shrug – “not so much.”

Elizabeth covered her mouth to stifle the giggle that threatened to escape.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

He bowed to begin the set and she curtsied.



Darcy stood, somewhat dazed, and watched as his wife danced with royalty. Never, in any of his imaginations, would he have expected such a thing to occur.

“I can guess the subject of your reverie,” came the low voice of his cousin, Viscount Ashton.

“Anyone with eyes in their head knows where my attentions lay.”

“Very true. I am of the opinion you are grateful for that little incident last November, where your wife quite literally fell into your arms.”

“Every day. I have no idea where Elizabeth and I would be if that had not happened.”

“You would still be stalking the edges of the ballroom, glaring at all the simpering debutants. Your wife, on the other hand, would be finalizing her travel plans to Spain.”

Ash slapped him on the back. “She would not have remained a single woman for very long once she set a dainty foot in that country. Some Spanish lord would have swept her off her feet.”

“No, her plans for traveling to Spain would have changed. Did you not hear that the Spanish ambassador died a few days after Christmas? He was interred at Westminster Abbey and his wife, the duchess, left almost immediately for Spain. Even if we had not married, Elizabeth could not have traveled with her.”

“Then, there is hope that the two of you might still have connected and fallen in love.”

“I suppose, although I am not sure how, or where we would have met again.”

“Darcy, all things happen for a reason. If you were meant to be together, you would have stumbled across her somewhere. Who knows? You said her cousin holds the living at Hunsford and has married a close friend. For

all you know, you both might have been in Kent at the same time. Or, she could have gone on a trip to northern England with family and stopped to tour Pemberley and you were home that day. Never doubt the vagaries of Fate.”

“What an imagination you have, Edmund. You should take pen to paper and write a book.”

“My scenarios may be far fetched, but they would make for a grand story. Just imagine. Two people struggling with their pride and prejudices while falling in love.”

Darcy only shook his head and continued to watch his wife dance. He would not change a thing that occurred to bring Elizabeth into his life. Ash’s fanciful imaginations left too much to unplanned coincidences. He would take the consequence of their compromise any day over the chance of never winning his wife’s tender heart.



It was a truth, universally acknowledged, that Miss Caroline Bingley was incapable of arriving at a much-feted social event on time, especially if it honored her greatest enemy. Because of this personal peccadillo, she entered the house of Matlock halfway through the first set. Charles immediately set out to find his angel and Caroline went to the lady's retiring room. By the time she had handed off her outerwear and exchanged her shoes for dancing slippers, the first set was nearing completion with a good ten minutes left before the dancers took their bows and curtsies and departed the floor. She was somewhat dismayed that no one had seen her grand entrance, huddled about the various doors and archways which fed into the ballroom. Spotting three ladies, and Caroline used that term loosely even though she curried their favor in order to advance her own social agenda, she made haste to where they stood, craning their necks to look over the crowds.

She tapped the closest lady with her fan to draw her attention.

“Miss Goodman, such a crush. What has everyone so enthralled?”

The three misses turned to face her and Miss Goodman said, “Have you only just arrived, Miss Bingley?”

“Yes, and we were quite perturbed there was no one to greet or announce my arrival.”

“Miss Bingley,” drawled Miss Whyte. “An earl and a countess are not going to stand about waiting for you and your brother to arrive. They have far more important guests to greet and speak with.”

“That may be,” Caroline said, raising her chin in defiance, “but we are great friends of Mr. Darcy and as such should be treated with more respect.”

“You have always claimed Mr. Darcy would marry you. Whatever happened, and do you know the current Mrs. Darcy?”

This came from Miss Grantly, whom

Caroline had counted as a somewhat close confidant.

“I can say with great authority that Mr. Darcy did not seek marriage to that social mushroom. Miss Eliza Bennet compromised him on the terrace at my own brother's ball. The little tart *fell* into his arms and conveniently tore the lace edging her bodice. It was quite disgraceful.”

She expected the three women to bombard her for more information because gossip was their social livelihood. However, they all stood, mouths slightly agape, looking over her shoulder. Caroline half turned to see who stood behind her and missed seeing the three ladies drop into respectful curtsies. She saw a middle-aged man in immaculate evening wear glaring at her. On his arm was Eliza Bennet, her eyes sparkling as though she were laughing at some inner secret.

Because there was somewhat of an audience starting to gather, she gave Eliza the

barest of nods with her head for a greeting. She did not even acknowledge the old fool who trotted about with her. Surprisingly, the man spoke to her without introduction.

“You know Mrs. Darcy?”

“Much to my detriment,” she sneered, not caring if everyone knew she despised the country miss with fine eyes and hems six inches deep in mud.

“Who is this woman?” the man demanded and a tall thin man stepped forward and said, “Miss Caroline Bingley, Sir.”

The man looked down at Eliza. “You and your husband are familiar with Miss Bingley, Mrs. Darcy?”

“We are, Sir. Her brother, Mr. Charles Bingley, is one of my husband’s friends.”

“My brother and I are Mr. Darcy’s *particular* friends,” Caroline said, wanting all and sundry to know how important she was to Mr. Darcy. That she was a better fit for master of Pemberley than the woman he’d been

forced to marry. “We have stood by him through this sham of a marriage and will continue to do so after he has thrown this tart off for a better match.”

“I see.” A look of understanding crossed the man’s face.

Caroline felt vindicated. Now she could step back and watch everyone turn on the Bennet chit and after tonight Eliza Bennet would never be able to hold her head up in society and force Mr. Darcy to divorce her. By this time, Mr. Darcy had stepped forward and placed his arm around Eliza’s waist, and drew her near to him. This was not to be borne. How could he lower himself to practically accost that fallen woman in front of everyone?

“Lord Matlock,” the older man said, “have your servants remove this woman from my presence.”

Yes! Caroline thought with glee. Finally, Miss Eliza Bennet would be shown exactly where she stood, or fell. She snickered at her

own small joke, then gave a start when two footmen took hold of her arms and began to steer her down the hall toward the staircase.

“On whose authority do you remove me from Lord Matlock's house!” she demanded and struggled to break free.

“Hold one moment,” she heard the man say and although they no longer dragged her down the hall, the footmen did not release their grip. All three of them turned to face the man and Caroline swore everyone who was at the ball was now crowded around, staring, grinning, pointing, and whispering in her direction. Fighting for her social life, she faced the man, chin held high.

“They are removing you from the premise on my authority,” the man said in a voice laced with steel. “You have insulted a cousin to the King of Spain and the granddaughter of Count de Cortez.” The man looked as though he were to speak again, but Darcy spoke up.

“She is also the much beloved wife of Mr.

Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire.” He cast an apologetic glance at the gentleman. “I am sorry to have interrupted, Sir.”

“No harm done, Mr. Darcy. I like a man who is impassioned to protect his wife’s reputation, regardless of the circumstance.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

As we all know, angry people are not always wise; and in witnessing her greatest enemy achieve victory and take the prize of Pemberley from her, Caroline lashed out in an attempt to wound him as much as her.

“How droll that you come to her defense so readily, Mr. Darcy. Why, I remember, when we first knew her in Hertfordshire, how amazed we all were to find that she was a reputed beauty. I particularly recollect your saying one night after the Bennets had been dining at Netherfield, “*She a beauty! I should as soon call her mother a wit.*” But afterward, she seemed to improve on you, or was it because she exposed her bosoms to you at my brother’s

ball.”

An almost unearthly silence descended upon the crowd. Only the rustle of silk gowns and nervous coughs dared cut through the ominous air. The man gave a cryptic look at the tall thin man and he hurried to have footmen usher all the guests back into the ballroom. Soon, only Mr. Darcy, Eliza Bennet, Lord, and Lady Matlock, and the unknown gentleman stood facing Caroline and her two guard dogs.

“Lord Matlock, introduce me to *that* woman?”

Lord Matlock stepped forward and bowed low. “With pleasure.” He turned to face Caroline and, with a smile that was not in any sense of the word friendly, said, “Miss Bingley, I present to you His Royal Highness, Prince Augustus, Duke of Sussex.”

Caroline fainted and awoke in a hackney carriage, her cloak, reticule, and shoes tossed on the floor beside her. The next day, she was

on her way to Scarborough before the guests of the ball had even risen from their beds.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Meanwhile, Charles Bingley had rushed to the ballroom in search of Jane. The colonel said he was courting Miss Bennet, but that did not mean he could not plead his case. They were not married and she was still a single woman. Plus, they had a strong connection. He knew she loved him and he had been an utter fool to abandon her after his ball last November. He would not make the same mistake twice and was determined to show her that his love was true and steadfast.

He spied her across the dance floor, and paying no attention to who was dancing, skirted the edges until he came upon her and the blasted colonel.

“Miss Bennet.” He gave her a low bow and took her hand in his, bringing her gloved hand

to his lips and brushing the lightest of kisses across her knuckles. He well knew how to romance a young woman. “You look absolutely divine this evening.” He gave the colonel and Darcy a quick greeting before turning his attention back to his angel. “May I solicit your next available set, Miss Bennet? I look forward to partnering with you again, it will bring back fond memories of the last time we danced.”

At the startled glance of Miss Bennet toward Darcy, he realized his error in reviving the memory of that night.

“I have only the sixth set open, Mr. Bingley – ”

“Wonderful, I will claim it before some other gentleman steps forward.”

“Oh..., of course, you may have the sixth set then.”

“Jane,” the colonel interjected and Bingley felt a flash of anger at his use of her given name. “I do not mean to embarrass you, but

Lord Blake had asked for your remaining set. Mr. Bingley approached before I could relay his acceptance.”

“Oh, dear.” Miss Bennet flushed ever so prettily and looked a bit flustered. She turned her soulful eyes toward him. “Mr. Bingley, please forgive my lapse in memory, but the colonel is correct. Lord Blake did ask me to save a set for him. I must decline dancing the sixth with you.”

By this time, the first set had finished and strangely enough, all the guests were filtering out of the ballroom, spilling into the anteroom and small sitting area which then led to the hallway and main staircase. He thought he heard Darcy spit out his sister’s name before cutting a glance at his cousin.

“Take the servant’s corridor,” the colonel said, his eyes scanning the near empty room. “You can access the hall much quicker.”

What in the world? Why would Darcy need to leave the ballroom so quickly? The

colonel took Miss Bennet's hand and said, "I should go and ensure that Darcy does not outright kill her."

"I am sure he will always behave the gentleman, but I know you wish to lend support."

"You will be well?"

Some sort of secretive communication passed between the two of them, sparking an odd indignation in Bingley's chest. He was not used to being ignored. Women always adored his manners and congenial attitude and at one time Miss Bennet had hung onto his every word. His angel nodded and smiled at the colonel who raised her hand to his lips and kissed it fully on the back before turning her hand over and kissing her palm. Her cheeks colored at the upstart's attention and her smile grew, making her look even more beautiful if that were possible. As soon as the colonel left her side, Charles attempted to take her hand in his, but she slid it from his grip and clasped

them in front of her body, watching him closely, her face strangely shuttered.

“I have missed you, so much, Miss Bennet. Allow me to tell you how passionately I love you.”

“Please, stop. You should not make such declarations to me.”

“But you loved me too. I know you did. It was in your every expression, your body language. You held me in great esteem.”

“I did hold you in great regard, Mr. Bingley. You were everything a young man ought to be at first acquaintance.”

“Then why? Why do you rebuff my attentions?”

“You left, Mr. Bingley.”

“That is all? I left?”

“Love is not just for pleasant afternoons and dinner parties. Love is standing with that person in times of hardship. Never losing faith in them regardless of what comes your way. Your friendship with me was a delightful

sandcastle, but when the waves of gossip and malice lapped at the foundation, it crumbled into nothing. Your desire to move upward in society was more important than keeping me and my family safe from rumors and innuendo. You removed to London because you thought Mr. Darcy had abandoned my cousin. You did not choose me. You chose the *beau monde*. Having made that choice, I wish you much happiness. Excuse me. I must attend my cousin.”

She pivoted and left him there, his mouth agape and his heart torn to shreds. What had he done? He cast a frantic gaze about, worried others might have seen her give him the cut direct, but most of the guests were still gathered near the door and archways, striving to see out into the hall and foyer. Whatever could be happening?

About to cross the abandoned dance floor, he paused when the guests started to return and huddled about in small groups, talking

with great animation. He scoured the crowd, searching for Darcy, his wife, and then, as his heat began to sink even further, his sister. What had she done now?

Lord Blake broke from his group and approached him, standing alone.

“Bingley, may I have a private word with you?”

Without waiting for his affirmation, he ushered him through the door which led to the card room. Gathered about were several lords and gentlemen, the smoke of cigars encircling their heads. Lord Blake took him to a corner where no one was close by and indicated he should take a seat. Almost immediately, a footman approached and handed them each a glass of brandy.

“You have my attention, Lord Blake,” Charles said, *and the sixth set which should have rightfully been mine*, he added in his thoughts.

“I feel it only gentlemanly to advise you that your sister has made the largest social

gaffe of her life and if you were smart you would take her out of London, post haste.”

“We have barely arrived! What has she done?”

Lord Blake then told him what had occurred and with whom. The longer he spoke, the more ill Charles felt. Damn Caroline and her venomous tongue! Why could she not leave Darcy alone? Had he not told her he loved his wife and wanted nothing to do with her? Why did she persist in chasing after him?

He shook his head. His sister was so obtuse at times. He would have to send her to Aunt Cora’s, there was no other choice before him. He mused for a minute. That would be a nice change and after he convinced Miss Bennet to accept his hand, they would enjoy a lovely marriage with no sniping at the dinner table, or temper tantrums that saw the destruction of vases and figurines, and maybe they would be able to retain the services of their maids and footmen for longer than three

months. He and Jane would have an idyllic life together.

“Did you hear what I said, Bingley?”

“What?” He broke out of his pleasant reverie. “Oh yes, yes, I did. I shall have to send Caroline home. She has quite ruined our evening.”

“She has ruined more than that, she is a social pariah.”

“Hmmm...yes, I can see that. I shall have to send her away and release her dowry. I cannot have her ruin my chance at a happy marriage.”

“You have someone in mind?”

“Miss Bennet. She is an angel.”

“Miss Jane Bennet? Mrs. Darcy’s cousin?”

“Yes, do you know her?”

“I do. In fact, Lord Matlock announced the betrothal of his son Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam to Miss Jane Bennet prior to the commencement of the ball.”

“Engaged! They are engaged!”

Charles stood so fast, his drink toppled off his lap and spilled down his pant leg. About to hasten from the room and confront the colonel, Lord Blake took hold of his forearm and stayed his movement.

“Do not do anything you will regret. Especially now, given the behavior of your sister. It seems the two of you are obsessed with the Bennet ladies for different reasons and my advice is for you to leave quietly. Speak with Darcy in a few days when this latest furor has died down and amend your friendship. As far as Miss Jane Bennet goes, desist with your admiration. Colonel Fitzwilliam is a hardened soldier, a crack shot and deadly with his blade. You do not want to get on his wrong side. He will cut you down and not lose one second of sleep over it.”

Charles stood; shoulders slumped in complete dejection. It was then he noticed some of the gentlemen in the room were laughing and realized the way the drink had

spilled, it looked as though he had lost control of his bladder. He exited the room and Matlock House as quickly as possible. The next morning, he joined his sister in the carriage to Scarborough.

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The crowds dispersed in the foyer leaving the royal retinue, Darcy and Elizabeth, Lord and Lady Matlock, and somehow the colonel and Jane also stood with them. His Royal Highness stepped closer to Darcy and said in a low voice, “When you grovel and apologize to your sweet wife, which you will, make sure it is done in private. If you attempt to gain her favor in public, she will think you are only trying to save face. I do not know what you were thinking, keeping low flung trash like that Bingley woman as a friend, nor can I understand how you could say such cruel things about such a delightful creature as your wife. I will have my man check in with you

two days hence to ensure you have done right by your wife.”

The prince then stepped away and gave Elizabeth a low courtier bow. Everyone was shocked that he would perform such a humbling service. He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

“You are everything that is lovely, my dear. Your husband is a good man, all I ask is that you listen with an open heart. Remember your determination.”

Elizabeth graciously accepted the kiss on her hand and dipped into a deep curtsy.

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

She stayed in that attitude until he tugged at her hand to raise her up.

“Lord and Lady Matlock, other than this one minor incident I enjoyed my brief sojourn into your home. I am authorized by the Queen to invite you and the Darcy’s to tea three weeks hence. The Lord Chamberlain of the Household, the Marquess of Hertford, will

issue an invitation with the date and time.
Good evening.”

He then pivoted and strode down the hall, disappearing down the grand staircase, his people close behind. Darcy tried to catch his wife’s attention.

“Elizabeth...,” he started to say.

She ignored his entreaty and looked everywhere but at him.

“Our guests are gathered in the other room and we should not keep them waiting,” she said, her head held high. “Lord Matlock, I believe my next set is with you.”

“It is, Elizabeth. Let me escort you back to the dance floor.”

He crooked his elbow and she placed her hand on his forearm and they both re-entered the ballroom. Darcy stood rooted to the floor, not moving even after hearing the musicians begin warming up before the next set commenced.

“Mr. Darcy.” He startled and noticed Jane

by his side. "I believe the next set is ours."

"I...", he knew not what to do.

"Give me your arm and escort me to the ballroom. Keep your head high and smile while we dance. Lizzy will forgive if you are honest in your feelings for her. You have made many mistakes, but have come too far to quit now."

He held out his arm and Jane graciously accepted it, smiling serenely at guests as they made their way to the second position in the line, next to Elizabeth and his uncle. His wife did not look at him, keeping her gaze locked on Lord Matlock. The smile gracing her face did not even remotely reach her fine eyes. He deeply regretted every foul thing that had crossed his lips with regard to Elizabeth and her family. Damn Caroline Bingley and her vicious propensity for tearing down his wife every chance she got. He had no choice, he had to cut the Bingleys from his life. This could not go on any further.

He and Miss Bennet danced in silence while his wife chatted gaily with his uncle. It wasn't until the fourth turn and he caught sight of how glassy her eyes were that he realized she was doing everything in her power not to cry. He had done this. Not Caroline Bingley, but him. He was the one who said those vile words and nothing could take them back.

In one of their turns where he held his wife's hand while she moved in a circle beneath his outstretched arm, he said, "Forgive me, Elizabeth. I have no words." When next they met, he whispered, "Please meet me in the library when our set comes up."

He was slated to partner with her for the supper set but knew it would be cruel to ask her to dance with him after what happened. She did not reply but nodded her head in affirmation. Thankful she agreed to meet and speak with him, he did not opportune her

further and let her enjoy his uncle's company. When the dance was finished, he escorted Jane back to Richard's side and made to remove himself from the room, stopping only when Aunt Lucinda blocked his exit.

“Where do you think you are going, nephew?”

“I cannot stay here and embarrass her further, aunt.”

“If you leave, the gossips will have a field day. Smile at your wife. Show everyone the love you have spoken of so freely. Give them nothing further to feast on.”

He saw the wisdom and nodded. For Elizabeth, he could do this. The next three sets were interminable and when the supper set was announced, he quietly left the ballroom and made his way to the library. He had asked a footman to ensure the fire was lit so the room would be warm and waited by the fireplace for his wife to join him. Only a few minutes passed before the door slowly opened

and like an achingly beautiful classic portrait, she stood silhouetted in the door frame. She hesitated briefly before coming into the room fully, advancing until she stood a few feet in front of him, her expression resolute and distant.

“I am truly sorry for what was said, Elizabeth.”

“You have made a habit of spewing hateful words with regard to myself and my family. Your comment that I am barely tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt you to dance was heard by most of my neighbors and friends and we now know of your unflattering remark over my lack of beauty in comparison to my aunt’s lack of wit.” She paused as though in deep thought. “I wonder how many of my servants were in the room at the time and heard what you think of their rightful employer and owner of Netherfield Park?” She waved her hand as though brushing that thought aside. “No

matter, but I know for a fact there were two footmen in the drawing room the night Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst discussed my aunt's relations. They most assuredly would have heard your view that given our atrocious relatives and low connections, the chance of any Bennet lady marrying men of any consideration in the world was materially lessened. Do you think they wonder, while they go about their duties, how much you hate being tethered to such a hideous looking wife with an idiot of an aunt whom you find vulgar and relatives who are in trade?"

Darcy flinched as every insult he'd uttered during those six short weeks in Hertfordshire was thrown back at him. If anyone was vulgar and crass, it was him. He did not deserve Elizabeth as his wife. She had never given him cause to be embarrassed. She always behaved with the utmost dignity, even when she skilfully skewered Miss Bingley on her behavior.

“I cannot deny I said those words and looking back, I am ashamed and appalled at my behavior.”

“Ashamed because you said them or because you were found out?”

“Both. Regardless, I should never have said them at all and you must realize – you must know – I most assuredly do not hold those views any longer.” Darcy scrubbed a hand across his face and stared at his feet, searching for words to allay her concerns and fear for their future felicity. “I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child, I was taught what was right, but was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles but left to follow them in pride and conceit. I was spoilt by my parents, who encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing; to care for none beyond my own family circle; to think meanly of all the rest of the world; at least to think meanly of their sense and worth

compared with my own. Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still have been but for you! By you, I am properly humbled. I stand before you, chastened beyond reason, hoping beyond hope you will forgive me my multiple trespasses.”

He gave a start when a small hand touched his arm and then slid down to hold his hand.

“Fitzwilliam,” she said softly and he met her gaze. “I will not lie and say your words did not hurt me. They most certainly did and to have them so publicly aired is almost beyond my comprehension. Having said that, you have since shown me a different facet to your character and I know you are a man who abhors deceit. If you say you are remorseful for your thoughts and previously held opinions, then I believe you. This is something we must work on together.”

He brought her hand up and crushed it to his chest over his heart.

“Although my actions belied my words, I now know the first time I beheld you my heart was lost forever and, fool that I was, I fought to push those feelings away. I love you, Elizabeth Darcy. You have bewitched me body and soul. Never will you ever hear me say a word against you or your family. You love them and because of that, I will always treasure them in my heart, for through their love and care, your character was formed. And I love your character almost as much as I love your form, your vivaciousness, your laugh, and your fine eyes.”

“Goodness, Mr. Darcy,” she teased with a slight smile. “When you put your mind to it, you can be quite charming. Are you sure you would rather not have a reset of our beginning and find a wife who would not give you so much heartache and turmoil?”

“No!”

“No?”

“Absolutely not! If none of this happened,

I would still be miserable and in want of a wife.”

“You cannot be sure of that.”

“All my adult life I have searched for a woman like you and if I had not accepted the invitation from Charles to come to Hertfordshire, I most assuredly would still be a single man, haunting one crowded ballroom after another, seeking the other half of my heart.”

He raised her hand to his lips and reverently kissed her knuckles. Her eyes widened and her pupils dilated in a manner he knew well. Although she was unaware or most likely unwilling to admit it, she still desired him. Not willing to press her further for the moment, he released her hand.

“Shall we join the others for supper, or would you rather remain here and converse some more about my horrible habit of inserting my very large feet into my even bigger mouth.”

His heart leaped when she laughed out loud.

“I am ravenous. I did not eat much prior to attending the ball, my nerves were too much in evidence at the time. I need sustenance to bear the rest of the night with equanimity.”

“May I still have the honor of the final set?”

“Yes, you may.”

Relief washed over him, abating a portion of the terror he'd experienced when he thought he might have lost her completely. Feeling somewhat giddy and lightheaded, he escorted his wife to the room where supper was laid out, joining his aunt and uncle, along with the Gardiners, the Bennets, Richard, and Jane. Guests quickly set aside the vile accusations bandied about by Miss Bingley, marking them down to bad behavior from a woman who had set her sights too high for her own good.

The next day, under the careful direction of Lady Matlock and a select group of intimate friends, tongues wagged in various parlors and drawing rooms not about what Miss Bingley had said, but about the fact that she had committed the ultimate social gaffe. She had insulted the King's son, Prince Augustus. By general consensus she was deemed as *persona non grata* and all doors to elevated society, and a few rings below, were firmly closed to her company.

Epilogue

“Well, Mrs. Darcy, what do you think?”

Elizabeth rested the back of her head against the broad shoulder of her husband, relishing in the feel of his strong arms wrapped around her body as they gazed across the land Fitzwilliam proudly called home. She should not have been surprised to find the park so very large as Miss Bingley, during her tenure at Netherfield Park, had gone on *ad nauseum* about all things Pemberley.

She and Fitzwilliam had entered the grounds at one of its lowest points, drove for some time through a beautiful wood, and had gradually ascended for half a mile, coming to a halt at the top of a considerable hill where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley, situated on the opposite

side of a valley. It was here where her husband had the carriage stop and escorted her to a natural plateau of rocks, whereupon she looked over the picturesque scene of his home.

Pemberley House was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills. In front, a stream of some natural importance, lazily dissected the manor grounds from the natural wilderness which spread its verdant blanket into a forest of mighty oaks. Elizabeth was delighted.

“Are you lost for words?” He pressed again for her answer.

“I have never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty has been so little counteracted by an awkward taste.” She placed her small hands over his large ones which fell naturally on her stomach. “What a perfect place to raise our son or daughter.”

He went completely still and she knew he had yet to release his quick intake of air.

“Am I to assume you have news?” he finally said on a soft exhale of breath which rustled the curls on the nape of her neck.

“I felt the quickening a few days ago.” She pressed his hands against her belly. “I had my suspicions for a while, but wanted to wait and make sure.”

He turned her in his arms and kissed her fully on the mouth before pulling her into a tight hug and spinning them around.

“Fitzwilliam!” she cried out on a laugh. “The poor child will come out dizzy if you persist.”

Immediately, he desisted and placed her feet back onto terra firm, both hands gripping her shoulders to steady her stance.

“Forgive me, Elizabeth. I did not mean to... I am just so overjoyed... The babe...”

She placed a finger against his lips, effectively stopping his flow of jumbled words.

“Shh..., the babe and I are fine. I am a hardy country girl you know. A little spin of happiness will not harm us.”

“How I love you.” He gathered her into her arms and enveloped her in a warm embrace. She relished the sound of his heart, beating in his ear, and the rumble of his deep voice as he spoke. “I would assume this explains your slight fatigue and lack of appetite these past weeks.”

“I took no notice at first with all the excitement around Lady Catherine and then my court presentation. Still, I should have recognized the signs. It wasn’t until my breakfast revisited me several mornings in a row that understanding knocked on my dull brain.”

“You, my dear, do not have a dull brain.”

“You do when you have not slept through one night complete,” – at this he tightened his grip because they both knew what kept them awake through most of the nights – “and when

you are knitting a baby inside your tummy.”

“Knitting a baby?” He chuckled. “I do not believe I have heard this process described quite like that.”

“It is found in the Psalms. Psalm 139 I believe. The actual verse reads that the Lord has covered the baby in the womb, but Mr. Ashbury, you may remember him as the gentleman who married us, told me the word used in the original writings meant to knit or weave. I have always loved that concept. It means the baby is being created with care and love.”

“I will adopt that verse as one of my favorites as well. Right after go forth and multiply. I can heartily get behind that command.”

She playfully swatted his arm. “You are a rogue, Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

“Yes, but I am your rogue, Elizabeth Darcy.”

He tipped her chin up with one finger and

brushed her lips with his. Meeting no resistance, he slanted his mouth over hers and deepened the kiss. When he stepped back, she remained in that attitude, eyes still closed. Slowly, a smile emerged.

“I believe, Mr. Darcy, your favorite verse is fast becoming my preference,” she whispered in a voice made husky by desire.

“Wilkes,” William called out to his driver as he hustled her into the carriage. “Make haste to Pemberley.”

“Yes, sir,” Wilkes replied with a wide grin as he cracked the whip over the horses’ heads.

William and Elizabeth followed that ancient command and brought forth three sons and two daughters in their marriage which spanned over fifty years. Their children continued the tradition and by the time William passed, a long six years before Elizabeth joined him, they had thirteen grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild on the way.

Pemberley forever rang with the laughter of love and children and many a proud Darcy man was felled by an impertinent miss and vivacious Darcy females kept the males of the *beau monde* on their toes for decades. It was a fitting consequence from their compromise.

Epilogue Part II

In case, gentle reader, you wondered at the fate of Mr. Wickham, Mr. Bingley and his sister... well... they had an interesting adventure.

I told a bit of a lie. Please forgive me. Mr. Wickham did not have an interesting adventure. The third day into his journey across the Atlantic, as he leaned over the railing expelling everything he'd ever held in his stomach since birth, a rogue wave swept him overboard. His early demise was noted in the log book and no one ever thought of him again.

Charles and Caroline did indeed travel to Scarborough after their separate disasters at Elizabeth's presentation ball, but the gossip from London followed them and life, as *they*

knew it, became unbearable. They made the decision to remove themselves from England and set sail for Canada later that year, never to return. Mr. and Mrs. Hurst breathed a collective sigh of relief as the ship left its mooring.

Within weeks of their arrival, Charles met a new angel in the Canadian town of York, (now known as Toronto), and married her post haste before she could change her mind. He then invested money in a fur trading company that became known as the Hudson Bay Company and raised two sons and three daughters with his lovely wife on the beautiful shores of the St. Lawrence River in a growing city called Montreal. He was exceedingly grateful that he had a flair for languages and spoke French fluently.

In 1813, when American forces attacked York, Charles and his wife were safely away, having already moved to Quebec. Caroline had stubbornly remained in Upper Canada as

she was determined to marry one of the more prominent generals. Unfortunately, during the attack, he was killed and she was carted off during the looting and rioting that followed.

One of the higher ranked American officers briefly entertained the thought of marrying her for the money she claimed her brother would pay for her safe return, but given her caustic tongue and high-minded manners, he made the wise decision to remain poor and unshackled. Instead, he let his men to play a game of cards for her hand. The intelligent soldiers 'lost' quite early, leaving Miss Bingley to the care of Sergeant Herbert Jackson, a mountain of a man who thought nothing of spanking his wayward wife if she misbehaved. Four children later and quite rosy bottomed, she finally learned to temper her words and attitude.

Surprisingly, once she folded that caustic tongue to the back of her mouth, her husband began to soften in attitude as well, and Mr.

and Mrs. Jackson had a happy marriage, adding two more children to the household. She never repined losing Mr. Darcy, although she was convinced that pert Eliza Bennet would have benefited from a husband such as *dear* Herbert.

The End